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OR,
Rafael Rickerly's Ruse.

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CHAPTER I.
UNDER A SPELL.

LIKE a castle on the Rhine stood Crag Eden, nearly half a century ago one of the grandest old manor-houses in the State of Virginia, but now only a ruin around which cluster bitter memories, and of which weird legends are told. Perched upon a mountain cliff, overhanging a swiftly-flowing river, it stood watch and ward over the homes of the wealthy planters below. Crag Eden had been built in Colonial times, by an English nobleman who had come to America to make his home, for the ban of exile was upon him, and upon his descendants fell a curse that affected the lives of many people, the story of which and the retribution which ensued

THAT ALTERNATE THE DARING YOUNG MAN TOOK. WITH HIS WHOLE WEIGHT UPON ONE REIN HE THREW THE HORSES, BUGGY AND HIMSELF OVER THE CLIFF!

form the scenes and incidents upon which my story is founded.

Three-score years ago the lord and master of Crag Eden was as handsome a young man as ever won the heart of a woman. He was tall, well-formed, a perfect athlete, and rode with a recklessness that soon won for him the name of "The Mad Rider."

His nature was cheerful, he was generous-hearted and utterly fearless; so it was no wonder he won the heart of half the girls in the surrounding country, for, added to his personal fascinations, he was the master of Crag Eden—a baronial home in its size and appointments. It overlooked the quarters of a couple of hundred slaves, that lay at the foot of the mountain, and with several thousands of acres of land surrounding it constituted the wealth of Raynor Rickerly, who, at twenty-one, had become the sole heir to the estate.

One afternoon Raynor Rickerly stood upon the tower of Crag Eden, which overhung the river, hundreds of feet below, gazing as it was often his wont to do, upon his fertile fields, with the slaves at work in them, and listening to the strains of melody that floated up to his ears, as they sung at their toil.

The grand forests, the hills, valleys and mountain fastnesses, with the highways running through them and the homes of aristocratic Virginians dotting all, lay before him.

Suddenly he started, his face flushing quickly, and then turning pale, as his eyes fell upon a small caravan that wound out of the forest into sight, half a mile away, upon the other shore of the river.

There were wagons, and horses, and a cavalcade of a hundred people, all in picturesque dress and appearing like a party of masqueraders.

Into a meadow sloping to the river they moved, and here they halted; the gayly-painted wagons were formed in a semicircle, the horses were staked out, tents were pitched, and the travelers had gone into camp.

Bitting his lips angrily, the handsome face of Raynor became more and more clouded, as he watched the camp scene.

Then he saw a horseman ride up to the larger tent, over which floated a blue flag, and, after a moment's halt, he rode down toward the river.

Into the swift current he urged his horse, and the splendid animal soon swam across to the other shore.

Still watching him, Raynor Rickerly beheld him strike into the highway that encircled the mound-like hill upon which Crag Eden was situated and turn into the massive gateway that led up to the mansion by a steep and winding road.

Soon after a servant appeared and stated that "A Gypsy wished to see the master."

"Conduct him here," was the command.

Ere long a dark-faced young man, clad in a picturesque garb, stepped out upon the tower and confronted the master of Crag Eden.

He gazed upon the young planter with a strange expression, while he said, almost haughtily:

"You are Raynor Rickerly?"

"Such my friends call me, but those who are not should be more polite," was the calm rejoinder.

"A Gypsy never chooses his words; but I came not here to quarrel with you, but to deliver a message."

"From whom?"

"From Roma Leigh, the Gypsy Queen."

"What message sends she to me?"

"That you will meet her at the place where before she has met you, at sunset, this day."

"Well?"

"Your answer?"

"I will not come."

"Do you see the land where the Gypsy camp is?"

"Yes."

"It was purchased by Roma Leigh."

The young planter started, and said, quickly:

"What do you tell me?"

"She purchased the land through an agent. It belongs to her, and there will camp the Romana Gypsies until you obey the command of Roma Leigh and meet her."

"The command?" haughtily repeated the Virginian.

"So I said, for the request comes from a queen, hence is a command."

"Ah!" and a sneer crossed the lips of Raynor.

"The Queen will remain in camp yonder, under the shadow of your home, until you obey her command and meet her. What message shall I return to her?"

"I will come," was the response, and, as the Gypsy turned and left the tower, a bitter imprecation was crushed between the teeth of the young Virginian, who, for some reason was under the spell of a queen of a vagabond race.

For some time Raynor Rickerly stood upon the tower, after the departure of the messenger.

"Who is that fellow that she has dared to trust?" he muttered.

Then he saw the Gypsy rider descend the road

to the valley, reach the river, urge his horse into it and once again ride up to the large tent in the camp.

A woman stepped out and met the messenger, who dismounted and led his horse away to stake him out upon the meadowland.

"She has played a bold game in purchasing that land. I would not have sold it for a hundred times the price had I suspected the purchaser; but I was deceived."

"Well, I must meet her; I dare not refuse, and I have just time to reach the place."

Leaving the tower Raynor Rickerly was soon mounted upon a superb horse and dashing swiftly along the valley highway to the rendezvous where he was to meet Roma Leigh, the Gypsy Queen.

CHAPTER II.

ROMA LEIGH.

THE woman who had sent the messenger to Crag Eden, sat behind a gauzy curtain eagerly watching his going and his coming.

She was certainly a beautiful woman, and yet she was a mere girl in years. Her beauty was of a barbaric kind, reminding one of an Egyptian queen.

Her face was bronze in hue, her hair as sable as a raven's plumage, her form as perfect as that of a Venus.

Her costume, too, was of oriental splendor, being composed of blue velvet, silver lace and a jaunty head-dress, shaded with a black plume, while her neck, arms and fingers blazed with precious gems, diamonds, rubies, sapphires, opals and pearls, whose sparkle rivaled the light in her glorious eyes.

"What said he, Incah?" she asked, of her messenger, rising in an indifferent manner as he approached, as though she had not been seated behind the screen gazing with eager, anxious face upon his going and coming.

"He will meet you, Queen."

"Did you use threats to compel him?"

"I told him, as he at first refused, that you owned this land, and here would be your home until he came."

"Then he said he would meet me, Incah?"

"Yes, Queen."

"I thank you."

But, as she turned away, Incah asked:

"May I not accompany you, for I fear that man?"

"No, for I do not fear him. I will go alone."

Incah departed, and soon after the Queen left the camp, crossed the highway and turned into a forest path.

Hardly had she done so when Incah darted across the road and, entering the forest, followed on the track of the young woman.

She had gone half a mile when the path wound around a large rock which had crashed down from the mountain above.

Here she halted, and, concealed by the rock, waited.

Suddenly a form appeared before her, and stepping into the path, she confronted the man who was dogging her steps.

He shrunk back before her angry eyes.

"Incah, how dare you follow me?" she demanded.

"Pardon me, Roma Leigh; I crave humbly your pardon; but I feared harm to you from that man, and I wished to be near to protect you."

She drew by a quick gesture a jewel-hilted stiletto from her bosom as she answered:

"I have no fear—see! and I know its use."

"But he is a man of wondrous strength—one whom you have forced to the brink of desperation."

"Incah, it is not for my life you fear, but that I may fly with that man, giving up my people and all for him. You dread my love for him, not danger to myself. I have given you my pledge, and a Gypsy's pledge is as sacred as death. If to-day I fail with Raynor Rickerly, then I keep my pledge to you."

"If you doubt me, then I break that pledge. If you believe me, go!"

She pointed back along the path they had come. The man bowed, turned and without a word retraced his steps.

She watched him until he was out of sight, and then went on her way along the pathway at the base of the ridge.

Fully a mile she walked, and turning into a path that led up the hill, soon came to a rustic arbor that sheltered the point of a cliff from whence a fine view could be obtained.

The arbor was rudely made, evidently built by frequenters of the place, and held a bench or settee of canes—by no means an uncomfortable resting-place.

Standing upon the very verge of the cliff, with no dread, although a sudden dizziness, a misstep, would dash her to the rocks a hundred feet below, the Gypsy Queen kept her eyes upon the dark forest bordering the river-bank a mile away.

Soon a cry of joy escaped her, for, out of the forest, came a horseman, who rode down to the river, where there was a ford, knee-deep.

Crossing the stream he came on at a swinging gallop, wound around the cliff, and, halting in

a glen, hitched his horse and ascended the path leading to the arbor.

The Gypsy Queen had pressed her hands hard upon her heart, as he drew near, as though to still its beating, and then, tottering to the settee, sunk upon it.

But, overwhelmed with some deep emotion as she seemed, the moment of his approach she was calm, and as frigid as an icicle.

Raynor Rickerly held out his hand, but the young woman drew back.

"What, Roma, you refuse my hand?" reproachfully.

"Does your heart go with it, Raynor Rickerly?"

His face flushed.

"You do not answer."

"Roma Leigh, I cannot marry you."

Her face for an instant was the picture of despair; but she choked back her emotion as she said:

"Your promise?"

"It was given two years ago, Roma Leigh, before I was of age, before my father's death. He left in his will that which bound me to another, and I must obey his dying command or lose my inheritance."

"I am a queen, a Gypsy Queen, and I possess riches beyond your own."

"It cannot be, Roma Leigh."

"Your promise?"

"I am held by a promise to my dying father even more binding and sacred."

"It is not that; but you will not, as you once promised when you loved me, to make me your wife, and if disinherited for so doing, to ally yourself with my people, to become by marriage the King of the Romana Gypsies."

"Look at me, Raynor Rickerly, and say if I am not more beautiful than I was two years ago? Am I not a woman now, where then I was a girl? Have not our tribe enriched themselves far more in those two years?"

"We have wandered afar, and in all those wanderings I have dreamed of you. I was told that you would forget me, and when no longer I received your letters, I wrote and asked you if I had lost your love."

"Your reply almost crazed me, Raynor Rickerly. I had refused Incah, and other noble young men among our people for your love. So hither I came again, and I was told that you loved another."

"I sent for you to come here, and now you cast me off—you tell me that Roma Leigh is nothing to you now, that another will be your wife, after I have made you my very idol."

"Speak, Raynor Rickerly, and say if, after the past between us, you now refuse to make me your wife, for so deeply do I love you that I would give up my people, fly with you to the uttermost parts of the earth, where I might dwell with you in happiness."

The man seemed greatly moved by the woman's earnest appeal, and yet decisive was his voice as he answered:

"It cannot be—never can be!"

"Who is it that you are to wed, Raynor Rickerly?"

And there was intense scorn in her voice.

"It matters not, Roma, who she is."

"Ha! ha! ha!"

The laugh was mocking and discordant.

"You need not tell me, for I know. I have not come here blindfolded, Raynor Rickerly, for I know all. You are to marry Agnes Ashly, and, as she is an only child and an heiress, her father's many acres that join your own will become yours."

"So be it, Raynor Rickerly, as you have chosen; but the heart that held your image, now shall hold only a demon of hate and revenge."

"It may not be to-day or to-morrow that I will strike, but some day it will come, for the Gypsy wronged in love always becomes an avenger."

"Roma Leigh will force you to recall in bitterness and sorrow the words you have this day uttered, proud Virginian!"

"This spot, this arbor, which we built as our trysting-place in the long ago, shall henceforth be sacred in my memory as the scene of my vow to make your heart suffer as mine now does."

"Go! Raynor Rickerly! Roma Leigh, the Gypsy Queen, would be alone!"

The last words were uttered haughtily, and, without response, the Virginian turned and descended the path to where he had left his horse.

Like the wind he rode homeward, and during the long hours of that night, he paced his room in bitter meditation.

When the morning came he glanced from his window and a cry of joy escaped his lips—the Gypsies had disappeared—had

"Folded their tents like the Arabs,
And as silently stolen away."

CHAPTER III.

HOW HE WAS WON.

AGNES ASHLY was one of Virginia's fairest daughters, and came of an old family of wealth and good blood. From her earliest girlhood she had been a belle, and her heart was as light as a bird's.

Beautiful she was, possessing a beauty that was spirituelle yet full of life, and as she grew

in years toward twenty she counted her lovers by the score.

She had admired the handsome young master of Crag Eden from her girlhood; but had loved him from the day he had saved her from death at the risk of his own.

It was in this way: Raynor Rickerly was driving a pair of young horses to a buggy. Only a few days previous had the bits been first put in their mouths.

They were thoroughbred racers, but he had taken a notion to drive them.

All had gone favorably until he came to where the road forked. One trail or way was little more than a bridle-path, leading around a hill upon a narrow ledge that overhung the river, fifty feet below, and ending in an abrupt hill, at the top of which it again joined the main highway on the ridge.

Carts had gone around the ledge, and horsemen, but never a pleasure vehicle; but the thoroughbreds, with a sudden bound, wheeled into the narrow way and dashed on at full speed.

In vain did Raynor, strong man and splendid driver though he was, try to check their headlong flight.

On that day Agnes was out for a stroll in the woods, hunting for wild flowers and ferns, when the gardens about Viewlands, the Ashly home, were filled with the most fragrant of exotics.

The attendant of Miss Ashly was a young negress, good-looking, and with a bandana upon her head, and Black Pink, for such was her name, had her arms laden with wild flowers, ferns and mosses.

Coming down the steep hillside, mistress and maid had sprung upon the ledge just as the runaway thoroughbreds came in sight.

The carpet of pine needles on the ledge had broken the sound of hoofs and wheels, and the maddened horses were almost upon Agnes Ashly and Black Pink before they saw them.

Then there came a warning cry from Raynor, but the hill was steep, and could not be easily scaled, especially by limbs that were weakened with fright; there was no room to turn out and to pass, for barely two feet at that point were between the wheels and the edge of the cliff.

At the cry of warning, Black Pink let fall the flowers, dropped on her knees, clasped her hands and raised her eyes in prayer, while her mistress sunk upon her knees, and covered her face with her hands, as though to shut out the appalling danger.

The young Virginian saw all at a glance. Another moment mistress and maid would be crushed to death; but one alternative would save them.

That alternative the daring young man took. With his whole weight upon one rein he threw the horses, buggy and himself over the cliff!

There were wild snorts of fright from the horses, a shriek of alarm from Agnes, then a heavy plunge and—silence!

But, Agnes Ashly was herself now at the peril of another. Springing to her feet she rushed to the edge of the cliff and looked down into the river, to utter a cry of joy as she saw the bold driver running toward the nearest landing-place, while the thoroughbreds were struggling wildly where they had fallen, and were mixed up in inextricable entanglement with harness and buggy.

Along the ledge she ran, to where a path led to a landing, Black Pink following as fast as her fright would allow.

They met Raynor calmly walking up the path, hatless, dripping and pale-faced, while a wound was upon his forehead.

Agnes tried to speak, but could not articulate, and, seizing his hand, she kissed it!

She heard a groan from his lips, saw him shrink from her, and Black Pink told what the matter was, for she cried:

"Lordy, Missy Agnis, dat arm am broke!"

"My arm is broken, Miss Ashly, but it is nothing when I see you safe."

"A broken arm, a wound on the head that looks severe, a pair of horses lost and a buggy crushed! Are our lives worth so much, Pink?"

"Yas, missy, massa holds me to be wuth two thousand dollars, and dem colts and buggy hain't wuth half that, while de doctor won't charge much fer settin' Massa Rickerly's arm," was the unexpected reply, and both Raynor and Agnes laughed at this view of the affair.

"I am so sorry, and I regret the loss of your fine horses as well," said Agnes, as they walked on up the path together.

"The devils can go without a regret, for devils they were to drive. I got this broken arm in trying to cut them free from the harness."

"But the doctor will soon patch me up, Miss Ashly, so I beg of you not to mind the affair, so long as you are safe."

"You will go to my home, for we can send you at once to Crag Eden, and I will have a message for the doctor to meet you there; that is, if you will not accept the hospitality of Viewlands."

"Thank you; I'll go on to my home," was the reply; and, an hour after, Raynor Rickerly was in his own room at Crag Eden and under the tender mercies of the physician.

Was it a wonder that this act increased the

already strong liking and admiration of Agnes Ashly for him into strongest love?

It certainly did; and more:—when Raynor's father left it in his will that his son and heir was to make Agnes his wife, the young man obeyed the wish with no regret, and one day, a month after the departure of the Gypsies from their camp near Crag Eden, the young master brought his wife to dwell in her new home.

At the request of Raynor, the marriage was a private one. If people wondered at this, they wondered more at the changed manner of the young planter. Even before his marriage he had become moody and silent; his merry nature seemed to have a shadow upon it.

Ever courtly to all, yet a stern, almost sullen man, in the very strength of his splendid young manhood, when life should have been gayest.

Agnes could not account for it, and was almost awed in her lover's presence even before she became his wife.

Then they were married, and, although grand old Crag Eden was most beautiful, the same shadow dwelt there; some blight seemed to have fallen upon the young master's life.

Visits of congratulation were never returned, and though some repeated them, the newly wed pair made no sign.

The young wife was never seen, as before her marriage, dashing about the country on horseback or driving herself along the highways. She attended the country church for a few Sundays, then ceased going, while Raynor Rickerly was never seen off his own estate.

Black Pink, who had accompanied her mistress to Crag Eden, was asked, in her visits to her kindred at Viewlands, the reason why Mrs. Rickerly had turned hermits. She shook her head sadly, but could not answer why. Then her visits ceased, and Crag Eden, its master and mistress were looked upon with awe, and weird, mysterious rumors were in circulation regarding them.

CHAPTER IV.

A GYPSY DOES NOT FORGET.

YEARS passed, and the "Hermits of Crag Eden" were known far and wide.

Planters riding along the valley highways to their homes on moonlit nights, would look up at the grand old pile on the hill-top and shake their heads, for the report had gone abroad that the master of Crag Eden was mad.

Children dreaded the place, and Raynor Rickerly was used as an ogre by which to frighten naughty boys and girls into obedience.

Hunt Ashly the father of Agnes, had gone to his last rest in the family sepulcher a year after the marriage.

It was said that his heart was burst by the treatment of his daughter and son-in-law, whom he had idolized; but he left to Agnes all his wealth, and upon the day of the funeral the family-carriage of Crag Eden had been seen approaching Viewlands.

In it were Raynor and his wife—a stern, pale-faced man, looking years older than he was, and a woman whose sad face revealed sorrow and suffering.

Cold bows they gave when spoken to, and, arm in arm, followed the body to the grave, the man in deep black, his wife in mourning and heavily veiled.

A sob came from beneath that somber veil as the clods fell upon the coffin, and the form quivered; but the husband's strong arm was about her, and a moment after she was led away to her carriage, and people who saw them shook their heads.

It was said by the slaves that Raynor Rickerly looked after each detail in the management of his estates, and that he was growing rich.

About his own grounds he would ride, often with his wife, and he had been seen by parties fishing on the river-bank, or hunting on the lowlands: but this was on rare occasions.

Two children were at last born to them. They were twins, and boys, and the neighbors hoped that this would bring Raynor and his wife again into society.

But it did not. On the contrary they seemed to keep still more closely to their hermit-like existence.

Thus more years went by, and one night a great wail of anguish went up from a strong man's heart, for Agnes, the wife and mother, had died.

The doctor who had attended her, had said that she slowly faded away—that she had died of a broken heart; but Raynor Rickerly, as he stood alone at the new-made grave, in the burying-ground of his people, discovered, to his sorrow, that this was not so!

Only the husband, the two little boys, in their seventh year, and the old slaves on the Viewlands and Crag Eden Plantations, had attended the funeral.

All had returned to their homes except the husband, for Black Pink had led the two weeping children away, leaving the stern, white-faced man to mourn over the grave alone.

The sun was touching the mountain-tops in the west, and shadows of the coming night were creeping over the valleys, as Raynor stood with folded arms gazing down upon the grave.

Suddenly there came a whirring sound, and,

could he believe his eyes? an arrow, to which was attached a card, buried itself in the new-made grave.

The man started, drew the card from the end of the arrow, and a groan was smothered as he read:

"Roma Leigh, the Gypsy Queen, taunts you over the grave of your wife."

"But the end is not yet!"

Strong man that he was, Raynor Rickerly reeled under this blow and sunk upon the grave in a swoon.

It was night when he revived, and making his way from the sacred spot he reached his home.

Half an hour after thirty faithful negro men left the quarters, some mounted, some on foot, all armed, and went away in the darkness of the night.

By noon they began to return, singly and in trios, and they had but one report to make, and what it was caused Raynor Rickerly to mutter:

"Could I have found her I would have killed her."

More years, and Royal and Rafael Rickerly had reached their twelfth year.

They were handsome lads and had been trained by their father in every athletic sport, while their studies had by no means been neglected. They were the very apple of their father's eye, and he seemed never happy with them out of his sight.

In another year he had promised to travel with them abroad, to complete their education, and the two youths held high anticipations of the pleasures in store for them.

"Come, Royal, let us go to the river for a swim," said Rafael, one afternoon.

But Royal was engrossed in a book and declined, so Rafael went alone.

Night came and he returned not. The servants were called, search was made and the missing boy could nowhere be found. All through the night the grief-stricken father and two hundred slaves searched, but without avail.

Morning came, and the slaves of both estates were turned out; neighbors joined in, and every valley and glen, every mountain-top was thoroughly gone over.

The river was dragged, cannon-shots were fired over it, and yet the body was not found.

It was two weeks before Raynor gave up the search, convinced that his son had been drowned and the body borne away by the current.

Then, from a small town in the Far West, a letter came to him.

It was in an envelope rimmed with mourning, and he broke the seal with feverish haste.

The hand he knew, yet could not recall.

Then he read:

"Roma Leigh, the Gypsy does not forget."

"She stole your child, and he died here yesterday."

"You will find his grave in the cemetery here, and it is marked simply:

"LITTLE RAFAEL,

"Aged Twelve Years."

"Once more Roma Leigh says—The end is not yet!"

No groan escaped the man as he read these lines.

He had already believed his child dead, and now he knew by whose hand his fair young life had been taken, for he did not believe that he had died a natural death.

"After all my coward fears, since I heard that woman's vow of revenge, and which made me hide like a hunted wolf in my den, which caused me to impart my secret and my dread to my lost wife, this devil has struck me twice in the heart."

"She has made me feel, and, my God! if she felt as I do, how fearful must have been her sufferings!"

"But I will cower no longer, for I will send my boy, all I have, into the navy, and I will go on the search for that woman fiend."

"I will seek no aid of the law, but will find her, and my revenge will make her regret that ever she was born."

"So shall it be, for I vow it before God! ay, by the ashes of my blessed Agnes and my beloved child!"

CHAPTER V.

A MADMAN'S REVENGE.

THE grave, to which Roma Leigh had directed the man she hurt so deeply, was opened, and the body of the youth was borne to a resting-place by the side of the dead mistress of Crag Eden, in the family burying-ground of the Rickerlys.

Soon after, Raynor Rickerly and his son left Crag Eden and Viewlands to the care of an overseer, and went, it was said, to travel in foreign lands; but within the year the name of Royal Rickerly appeared as a newly-appointed midshipman at the United States Naval Academy, and those whom curiosity or interest caused to make inquiry were told that Raynor Rickerly was traveling abroad.

In truth, letters bearing a foreign postmark were passing regularly through the village post-office in Virginia, a few miles from Crag Eden, addressed to the overseer in charge of the two plantations.

This overseer, Homer Scott, must have been selected by the master of Crag Eden as a counterpart of himself, for he was a stern man, though ever kind to the slaves, and a thorough manager, while, when asked about the master, he very bluntly gave reply that he considered it no one's business to know, and until Mr. Rickerly gave him orders to instruct his neighbors about his movements, he would never do so.

From the time of the visit of the Romana Gypsies to the neighborhood of Crag Eden, when Raynor Rickerly and Roma Leigh had met at their old trysting-place in the arbor on the cliff, no one had seen any of that dark-faced, roaming people in Virginia.

The taxes on Queen Roma Leigh's land had been regularly paid, and in his search for the woman, after traveling for some months with Royal and then leaving him at the Naval Academy, Mr. Rickerly had gone to the one from whom the tax-money had come.

That person was a lawyer, knew his client as Roma Leigh, and could only say that he received the money at stated times from her.

"From where?"

He had not even noted that, but would look.

The letters were in the Gypsy Queen's writing, which Raynor Rickerly knew well, and simply inclosed the money, while they were post-marked at a dozen different places.

These places Raynor Rickerly jotted down, and then his search began.

At not one of those towns did any one know aught of the Romana Gypsies.

Advertisements were put in the papers, asking the whereabouts of all Gypsies, that a book might be written of them, and offering an incentive in the way of payment to any person sending valuable information.

This "blind" caused Raynor Rickerly to receive hundreds of letters from all parts of the country.

He ascertained from them the whereabouts of a few of the Gypsy bands, and then again went on the search.

Thus three years passed, and one night Raynor Rickerly, as untiring as a bloodhound, and as relentless, arrived at a seaport on the English Coast, where he had heard there was a band of Gypsies.

He had not been misinformed, for in a glen without the town a band of these wandering people were encamped.

It was said that they were the remnant of the real Romana tribe, and could count their wealth by the scores of thousands.

Their number was not large, a couple of hundred all told perhaps. They dressed in a costume that was striking and picturesque. They had roamed the earth over, people said, and, as proof of this, the blue flag over their ruler's tent had in its center a golden globe, and with a red line to mark their tracks over sea and land, for when their humor pleased them to visit other shores, the sea was no obstacle, a vessel was chartered and their ceaseless pilgrimage continued.

The Queen of these wanderers was a remarkable woman. She was very beautiful, her form almost girlish, though it was said she was verging on thirty-five years of age.

Her dress and jewels an empress might have envied, but, despite her personal beauty, the almost constant smile upon her face was repelling, rather than winning, and her eyes shone with a luster that would have looked better in the orbs of a tigress.

She was married, and her husband was like a very slave in his devotion to her, even more subservient than were any others of her people.

"A messenger to see you, Queen," said her husband, approaching her tent accompanied by a man dressed as a laborer in the coal-mines, whose face was smeared with soot, and hair and beard unkempt.

"What would you with Roma, the Gypsy?" asked the woman, imperiously.

"I am a poor man, Lady Queen, and live with my old mother. She is troubled much by dreams and forebodings of evil, so would consult your knowledge as to the future's store for her, and me, of good and evil. Here is gold, and it's no sma' sum for a poor man."

"You will have to go to her, for she is crippled and canna' come to you. Her home is the red cottage on the hill, where are the five maples in the yard. It stands alone, Lady Queen. Go there before set of sun, for mother will be waiting your coming."

The man spoke hastily, as though impressed with the power and presence of the Gypsy Queen, and was anxious to get away.

The sum he gave was generous, and Roma said that she would go within the hour.

Just before sunset she knocked at the door of the "little red cottage, with the five maples in the yard."

An aged voice bade her enter, which she did, to find an old woman within, seated in an easy-chair near a table, upon which stood a decanter of wine and two glasses.

"You are the Gypsy Queen?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Be seated, and drink wine with me before you talk, for it is said to soften the tongue of

the fortune teller against bitterness toward the one whose future she foretells," said the woman, in a trembling voice, and she filled the two glasses with wine.

Roma Leigh dashed off the wine with the air of one who loved the intoxicating cup, and the old woman also drained her glass, but slowly.

"What would you know, mistress?"

And Roma threw herself into a large, clumsy-looking easy-chair in front of the old woman.

There was a rattling, clicking sound, and instantly steel arms crossed over the neck, body, and clasped the feet of the Gypsy.

She was a prisoner in the chair, in the grip of an infernal machine!

At the same moment the old woman arose; a wig of white hair and a cap were removed; spectacles were dashed from her eyes; the neckerchief and gown were cast aside, and the tall form of a man confronted her.

"Raynor Rickerly!"

The name came in a shriek from the Gypsy Queen, while her eyes became bloodshot with terror, for the stern face, almost fiendish now in its look of joy, was that of the master of Crag Eden!

"Yes; I am Raynor Rickerly, Roma Leigh, curse of my life! Shriek, howl, weep, beautiful monster that you are! You at last, after years of search, are in my power."

"That chair is the infernal invention of a madman, and I bought the toy that it might be your death-couch. The wine you drank was poisoned. It will kill you in just one hour. You will die slowly, and my presence will be your anguish."

"Ay, call for help, shriek while you can; but no one will hear you, no help will come!"

"You poisoned my wife, you killed my son, and this is my revenge!"

"Your threat made a coward of me, because I feared for her I loved; I forced her to live like a recluse. I told her all—all what you and I had been to each other, and your vow of revenge filled her soul with terror of evil as it had mine."

"Our fears were not uncalled for; you murdered her, you murdered our noble boy, and you said that the end was not yet."

"You meant that my other son should die, and that I, a broken-hearted man, should go down to the grave in despair, and you would have kept your vow."

"But, monster of cruelty that you are, you aroused a spirit of implacable revenge in me, call it madness if you will. I have dogged you to your death; I have nerved myself to kill you, to cruelly, relentlessly kill you."

"I could hardly keep my hands off your throat, you beautiful fiend, when, disguised as a miner, I visited your camp to-day and sent you here—here where you now are dying before my eyes!"

"Now die, and I will gloat over your agony."

He stood before her with folded arms, his eyes upon her terror-stricken face, and his ears deaf to her pleadings for mercy.

Slowly the minutes passed, until at last, the head of Roma Leigh fell forward; the Gypsy Queen was dead.

CHAPTER VI.

A BRAVE BOY.

As quietly "as a thief in the night," the master of Crag Eden came back to his home, which for over four long years had not echoed to the step of a human being, for it had been closed by the overseer, and even the old family servants had gone to take up their home in the slave quarters.

One noon the overseer, Homer Scott, had received a letter from Washington City.

It read:

"I will return at once. RAYNOR RICKERLY."

The overseer smiled, as though the tidings were pleasant to him.

He was an honest man, had been a good and faithful steward, and had nothing to fear from the master's coming.

Black Pink was at once looked up and told the news, for she had developed into the house-keeper of Crag Eden, and Darius, the butler, Tiptoe, the house-girl, Patience, the cook, with the coachman and stable assistants, were all called into a general consultation.

The result was that a wagon rolled up to the mansion with their traps, the overseer had gone ahead to open the doors, rusty from disuse, and Crag Eden at once became a busy scene.

The windows and doors were opened, sweeping and dusting indulged in, and the place was not half in readiness, after its long desertion, when a carriage from the town rolled up just after dark and Raynor Rickerly stepped out.

His hair had whitened in the time he had been away; his face was sterner, perhaps, but he had a kind greeting for all, and said, with a look of real pleasure, to Black Pink the next day:

"The old place needs overhauling badly, Pink, and the furniture is worn and moth-eaten. We must fit it up and refurnish it, for the young master graduates soon, and the place must look cheerful to welcome him, as he will have a leave at home for two months."

Black Pink was in an ecstasy, and she quick-

ly reported the prospects in the servants' hall, adding:

"I decar', massa must be in love ag'in, but he'll never git no one like my poor missy was."

"Wal, I hopes he won't change his mind about fixin' things."

To the joy of the servants he did not, for a general overhauling of the place was begun.

Carpenters, painters and upholsterers were sent for and came from the city to go to work, and Raynor Rickerly overlooked them with real pleasure, glad it seemed, that all would be so cheerful about Crag Eden when Royal, his son, would return.

The stables were refilled with horses, a new carriage and buggy was bought, the flower gardens, which had not been wholly neglected, were soon in blooming condition, and half the house was refurnished.

At last all was in readiness for the coming of the young sailor.

The neighbors, many of whom had said unkind things about Raynor Rickerly, still held aloof.

They had called him a madman, a miser, had said that his cruelty had killed his wife, and driven even his son Rafael to take his own life to escape his harsh treatment, and naturally they held aloof, not caring to call upon the returned master of Crag Eden.

They wondered at the change, and were anxious to know what the upshot of it all would be.

Some six weeks after his own return, Rickerly received a letter from his son. It was dated at the Naval Academy, and read:

"I stood number one in my class, and take all first honors. Will have a two-months' leave to spend at dear old Crag Eden with you, so expect me within a week, for I shall stop in Washington a few days."

"Your attached

"SON."

Raynor Rickerly dashed a tear from his eyes as he read the letter, and then he called Black Pink and Darius and read the letter to them, and within an hour it was all over the two plantations that the young master would soon arrive.

That young gentleman meanwhile had left the Academy with flying colors, tarried awhile in Washington, and then taking the train to the nearest station to Crag Eden, had, upon being unable to find a suitable conveyance to carry him home, hired a boat and a couple of negroes to row him there.

They pulled hard, hoping to reach Crag Eden before nightfall; but the current was swift and muscles are human machinery, so they were yet several miles away from their destination when darkness settled down upon the land and water.

"Do you see that light ahead, boys?" asked Royal, addressing his two oarsmen, who turned and glanced in the direction indicated.

"Well, that is Riverdale, the plantation home of Colonel Burbank, and Crag Eden is but a mile and a half from his landing, so pull with a will, if you don't want to miss one of Mammy Black Pink's grand suppers," and the memory of the good things of his childhood, which Black Pink spoiled him with, coming over him, he lapsed into deep meditation.

Suddenly he was startled from his reverie by a wild scream; then followed in a man's hoarse voice:

"Do that again, girl, and I'll knife you! Pull, boys! I'll keep my hand over her mouth so she can't screech again!"

Out from under the shadow of the land shot a boat, almost upon the one in which sat Midshipman Royal and his negro crew, and which it was evident had not been seen by the speaker.

"Lay alongside of that boat, men, for there is devilry being done!" cried the young midshipman.

Something in his tone compelled instant obedience, frightened as the negroes were.

The next instant the two boats came together with a crash, Royal Rickerly sprung into the one that had so suddenly been checked in its progress, and two pistol-shots rung out on the night air.

CHAPTER VII.

MIDSHIPMAN RICKERLY.

WHEN Midshipman Royal Rickerly so daringly boarded the boat, he had not thought of the chances for or against himself in a struggle with what might prove to be desperate men.

At the Naval Academy he had been noted for his pluck, his courtly manners to his fellow-cadets and officers, and as one who had taken all hazing in good part.

He had had his battles, and, thanks to his father's good training, he had come off victor, and a man whom he once fought with was his friend afterward.

He stood at the head of his class, and yet not a fellow-cadet envied him the position they felt he had won.

His purse was open to his friends, and many a poor fellow had received help from him without show.

On a cruise he had gone aloft in a gale and secured a sail, and once in a storm he had sprung overboard to save a sailor who could not swim, and the two were with the greatest difficulty

rescued by the life-boat, and the middy had made light of his danger.

Now, after over four years' absence, he was returning to his boyhood's home as a young naval officer.

He was returning to a home that had been regarded with awe in his childhood, and where he had looked upon his beautiful dead mother's face and lost his twin brother whom he had loved with all his heart.

His stern father he had ever dearly loved, for to him he had ever been gentle and kind.

Handsome as an Apollo, strong as a young giant, and the bearer-off of the first honors from his fellow-cadets—such was Royal Rickerly, the heir to Crag Eden, the young sailor upon the threshold of manhood, for he was only eighteen.

And, with the fearlessness of his nature, hearing a cry for help, a cry in a woman's voice, he had counted no odds and sprung to the rescue.

There were three men in the boat, two at the oars, one in the stern, and the latter held a form in his arms. He it was who had fired the first shot and it had been well aimed.

But a second shot came from the midshipman, and the one he aimed at fell forward without a moan upon the form, now motionless, he held in his arms.

The oarsmen, in alarm had dropped their oars and turned upon the midshipman, one with a knife, the other with a pistol; but, before the latter could fire a second shot he was struck a stunning blow by an oar in the hands of one of the negroes, and he fell overboard and sunk from sight, while his remaining comrade, with knife upraised, was checked by a thrust from the midshipman's sword.

"Pull ashore, quickly, lads, with both boats, for the lady has swooned, perhaps has been slain, and I am wounded."

As he spoke Royal Rickerly sunk down in the boat as though from weakness.

The negroes needed no second bidding, and were soon at the landing, while people were seen rushing to the spot with lanterns, alarmed by the firing.

"What is all this?" cried a stern voice, as a gray-haired gentleman came upon the scene, with half a dozen negroes following with lanterns.

"Dese dead men, sah, was carryin' off a lady, sah, and when she cry for help dat young officer he attack de robbers and dere was a scrimmage, massa, and he am wounded, maybe kilt, for he do look like it."

But Colonel Burbank was busy before the negro oarsman had finished his explanation, and raising the form in the stern of the boat, still grasped by the dead kidnapper, he cried:

"Great God! it is my own child! These men were kidnappers! Thank Heaven she has only swooned, but I fear her brave preserver is dead."

"Who is he, my man?"

"I don't know his name, sah, for he hire us at de village to row him up de river, and he live at Crag Eden Plantation he say."

"Yes, he wears a naval uniform—it is young Rickerly!"

"Here, my men, bear him to the house with me, and do some of you boys stay here with these dead bodies."

"Ephraim, go as though you were chased by ghosts after Doctor Lovering, and then come back by Crag Eden and tell Mr. Rickerly that his son is at my house, having met with an accident."

The negro darted away, the two oarsmen took up the limp form of Royal Rickerly, and Colonel Burbank, raising his daughter in his arms, started for the mansion, two hundred yards away.

"Father, I am all right now, so let me walk, so as not to frighten mother."

Colonel Burbank muttered a fervent prayer of thanks, as he heard the low-spoken words, and instantly obeyed, while he drew the heavy blanket from about her person.

"I had only fainted, sir, and yet I seemed conscious though I could not speak. I hope the one who came to my rescue is not badly hurt."

"I hope so, from my soul, Violet; but, here we are and your mother to greet us."

A few words of explanation were given the frightened mother by her daughter, while Colonel Burbank had the midshipman borne into a guests' chamber, just as Dr. Lovering came into the room.

"What is it, colonel, for I met Ephraim just outside your gate, and he sent me here, but gave no reason."

"Doctor, you are the most welcome man in the world. My daughter was kidnapped; this young man went to her rescue, and has been badly wounded, so I leave him in your hands."

"And your daughter?" asked the man of medicine, as he coolly threw aside his coat and opened his surgical case.

"Fainted, but is all right; but, I beg you to lose no time."

The doctor was already at work. He had drawn off the uniform coat, cut away the shirt and found the wound.

"Here it is, and a close call the lead made to

his heart. I only hope it is not fatal, as his unconsciousness would indicate—ha! here is a second wound, and this is what has caused him to faint, for see how it bleeds!" and the surgeon turned at once to the second wound, which was in the arm. "It has cut an artery, but we'll soon have it caught up," he muttered, and he worked with a rapidity and skill that soon stopped the flow of blood.

"The bullet cut its way through, you see, colonel, and I thought the blood on the arm was from the wound in the body, for I did not expect two."

"Now to this wound," and he probed the one near the heart.

The youth flinched, and the doctor smiled.

"Ah! that is good indeed, for the bullet glanced on the rib, which checked its force, and—here—it is!" and the doctor extracted the bullet with the utterance of the last word.

The wounds were dressed, the baggage of the midshipman was sent for to the boat, and he was made as comfortable as possible, just as there came the rapid clatter of hoofs upon the gravel drive, and Raynor Rickerly sprung from his horse.

His face was as stern as death and as livid as a dead man's.

His voice was metallic in its tone, as he said to Colonel Burbank:

"My son is here and wounded?"

"Yes, sir, but the doctor gives every hope now, thank God!"

"My little daughter was kidnapped by an overseer, whom I discharged, with two confederates, and she would have been carried off, but for your noble boy, who, on his way home by the river, came upon the scamps and boldly attacked them."

"He killed two, even after being wounded, and the third was knocked overboard by one of the negro oarsmen, and I sincerely hope is drowned."

"I will call the doctor to see you."

Mr. Rickerly made no response, but simply grasped the hand of the colonel.

His face lost its fearful expression, and as the colonel turned away to call the physician, he muttered:

"Thank Heaven, I made no mistake."

"I feared, after all, that I had failed, that she yet lived and this was her work."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PLEDGE OF A GIRL.

THE body of the kidnapper, whom the negro oarsman had knocked overboard into the river, was found lodged against some rocks a mile beyond the scene of the short, sharp combat upon the water, and was buried, with the remains of his comrades in crime, on the other shore of the river.

Upon the body of the discharged overseer were discovered some papers which told of his plot to kidnap Violet Burbank and keep her in hiding until her father paid a large sum of money for her return, and his devilry would have met with success but for the brave young middy.

The two negro oarsmen, before they went back to the village with handsome rewards for their services, were glad to be allowed to go in and press the hand of the young sailor in farewell.

In the neighborhood Royal Rickerly at once became a hero, for the news spread like wild-fire of his daring rescue, and many were the hopes expressed for his speedy recovery.

At the urgent request of Colonel Burbank, the master of Crag Eden remained at Riverdale and a room was given him adjoining his sons', while Black Pink came over as special nurse.

The father was most devoted, leaving his son only long enough to ride to Crag Eden and back each day, and seeming never to tire of his watchful care.

He dined with the colonel and his family, and, as they had never met him, and had been influenced in their views regarding him by the gossip of the neighborhood, they were surprised to find him so courtly of manner, and so brilliant a conversationalist.

They had moved into the neighborhood when Mr. Rickerly had been living with his wife at Crag Eden as hermits, and had been led to regard him as a perfect ogre, who was cruel to all about him.

They found him indeed a stern, silent man, unless drawn out of meditations that seemed painful, but, otherwise, a charming companion, and a father who idolized his son.

Did he meet others he was cold, haughty and silent, but to the Burbanks never so.

Violet Burbank was a girl of fifteen, or soon would be, and a perfect little fairy that seemed to at once win the heart of the stern master of Crag Eden.

She was lovely of face, graceful in form, and endowed with true nobility of character.

She had traveled much with her parents, for she was an only child, and her mother had delighted in educating her.

She had gone to a favorite seat of hers on the river-bank, the day of the kidnapping, and having been up late the night before at a young folks' party in the neighborhood, had become sleepy and dropped off to sleep.

It had seemed to her that she had inhaled some delightful perfume; but she awoke with a start, was half-dazed, found it was dark and that she was enveloped in some rough garment, and was being borne along in some one's arms.

She had seen the boat of the midshipman and uttered her cry for help, and then what followed she only half-remembered.

Such was her story, and she ended by saying: "Oh, Mr. Rickerly, if it had not been for your brave son I would have died of fright, I know."

"He is a noble boy, and I have written to the Secretary of the Navy of what he did," Colonel Burbank added.

Dr. Lovering was most faithful in his duty to the wounded sailor, and Black Pink was as devoted as a mother could have been, so that it was not very long before Royal rallied and began to improve rapidly.

As he grew better Mrs. Burbank brought Violet in one afternoon, and said pleasantly:

"I hardly think an introduction is necessary, Mr. Rickerly, to my daughter."

The youth smiled and held forth his hand, which Violet took and said:

"We have met before, Mr. Rickerly."

"Once."

"No, this is our third meeting, for six years ago we met one day when I was riding on horse-back. My hat blew off and was carried into the river; I heard a plunge; you had jumped in, all dressed as you were, swam after it and brought it to me. Have you forgotten it?"

"Oh, no; how could I when you thanked me so meekly for the little act?"

"But I did not come here to talk, but to read to you, for mamma has said I might, so what shall it be?"

"What do you prefer?"

"I had selected one of Cooper's sea tales, as you are a sailor."

"How thoughtful of you!"

Violet opened the "Red Rover," which Royal had read, but had never thought half so interesting as when read in the low, musical voice of Violet Burbank.

After a month's stay at Riverdale, Mr. Rickerly carried his son home, and, beautiful as was grand old Crag Eden, it seemed really gloomy to Royal, for it was not gladdened by the face of the little fairy he had of late seen so much of.

A week after Royal was allowed to be up Mr. Rickerly invited Colonel Burbank, his wife and daughter and Dr. Lovering to dine at Crag Eden. They were received in full dress by the master and by the midshipman in full uniform.

The guests were almost awed by the grandeur of the old home, added to the stories told of it; but they were impressed, also, by the splendid furniture, the paintings, statuary and the massive silver service at table.

The servants were perfectly trained, the cooking was delicious, and the wines in the cellar of Crag Eden were of the best.

The ice having been broken, to so put it, by Royal's return home, he rode about the neighborhood, often with Violet, made a few acquaintances and won the admiration of the young maidens and the envy of the beaux by his handsome appearance and the fact that he had already proven himself a hero.

At length the time drew near for him to report to his ship, which was to start upon a four-years' cruise in foreign waters.

He had rowed down the river to say good-by to the Burbanks, and had found Violet seated in the arbor on the bank.

"I have my orders, Violet, so have come to say good-by."

He saw her start, try to speak, her lips quiver and tears come into her eyes.

She was but a girl, but she loved—yes, loved this handsome youth with the intensity of a woman.

And he?

He took her hand in his, and said:

"Violet, instead of going to China seas, as I was first ordered, I am now to report on board a vessel that goes at once to the coast of Mexico, for war has broken out between our Government and that."

"Oh, Royal!"

"You are but a girl, Violet; I a boy, as it were; but I love you, and ask your love in return; and more, I ask you to promise to be true to your love for your sailor lad and become his wife when he returns, years hence, for I may be long away?"

For answer she put her arms around his neck, kissed him, and said:

"I will be true, Royal."

This was her pledge, and their engagement. It was sanctioned by the colonel, his wife, and by the stern master of Crag Eden.

The next day Midshipman Royal Rickerly had joined his ship, and the master of Crag Eden was left alone, once more.

"This house is like a sepulcher now, Pink," he said, grimly, as he sat at dinner the following day.

"It is mighty lonely, sah, 'deed it is," and Pink wiped a tear from her eyes, for in her heart came a foreboding that some day it might be still more desolate.

CHAPTER IX.

THE LOST LIEUTENANT.

"MR. RICKERLY, I am informed by this Mexican pilot that good water can be obtained from a fine spring that can be found one mile up the lagoon we see yonder."

The speaker was Lieutenant Edward Higgins, commanding a schooner-of-war in the United States Navy, and the one he addressed was Royal Rickerly, a midshipman, but acting as third in command of the vessel.

The scene was off the coast of Mexico a league, with Frontera in sight.

The schooner had rendered good service thus far during the fight between the United States and Mexico, and thrice had the name of Midshipman Royal Rickerly been sent home as deserving of mention for brave deeds, and as the grim master of Crag Eden read the accounts of how his brave boy had distinguished himself, his heart was glad within him. Black Pink, Darius and the other house-servants had been called into the library to hear the news.

There was another who read the news with equal interest, and that one was Violet Burbank, for the colonel took all the papers bearing upon the war, having once been a gallant army officer himself, and he, too, felt an interest in the doings of his future son-in-law.

Royal had been absent for nearly two years, and, excepting to occasionally ride over to Riverdale, the master of Crag Eden went nowhere and appeared to be almost as great a recluse as ever.

At Riverdale, however, he dined now and then, and in return the colonel and his family were invited once each month to take dinner at Crag Eden.

The letters which Planter Rickerly received from his son were always conned over in the Riverdale household; but those received by Violet from her sailor lover were not made public, although paragraphs here and there were read aloud, where they did not touch upon love matters.

Then came the news that "for gallant services rendered, in landing with a force from the schooner, and capturing a quantity of stores, arms and prisoners, Midshipman Royal Rickerly had been promoted to the rank of lieutenant in the Navy of the United States, by order of the Secretary of the Navy."

This good news thrilled the hearts of Crag Eden's master and the dwellers in the pretty home of Riverdale.

The plantation people of Crag Eden and Viewlands were given two days' holiday and a feast, while Mr. Rickerly invited the Burbank family over to dine with him, when the health and success of the gallant lieutenant was the toast.

This news of his promotion, and the joy it had given at home, had not reached Royal Rickerly on the day when Lieutenant Higgins ordered him to go ashore after water, which was much needed by the vessel.

Mails were slow in those days, and dispatch-boats to the fleet were the only means of carrying messages and mails, and a vessel off on service had to await the coming of orders, or her return to headquarters, before receiving tidings from home.

And then, too, sail, not steam then was the motive power of our war-ships.

In the two years since his leaving Crag Eden, Royal had developed into a splendid-looking man.

A painting, by a brother-officer, which he had sent to Violet, revealed him as larger, more manly, and shaded his upper lip with a mustache, while his face was darkly bronzed by exposure to the Southern sun and Gulf breezes.

One would hardly have recognized him as the midshipman who had carried off first honors from his fellows, two years before.

He had proven himself, also, to be a skilled seaman, and in an engagement with a Mexican brig, which had been captured, and several fierce fights in the boats and ashore, the midshipman had won the admiration of his brother officers and men.

Knowing the danger of landing with a small force upon the Mexican shores, Lieutenant Higgins had sent half of his crew of eighty men under Royal, in the four boats, with a small howitzer in the bow of one of the cutters.

Hardly had the boats pulled shoreward, with the Mexican pilot and the young commander in the leading one, when a vessel hove in sight.

It proved to be a United States dispatch-schooner, bearing the mail and orders for the fleet scattered from the Rio Grande to Yucatan, and, after signaling the commander, boarded the schooner-of-war.

He had orders for Lieutenant Higgins to leave the schooner in command of the next officer to him in rank, and to go in the dispatch vessel to take command of a brig for a special cruise.

The order also came promoting Royal Rickerly to a lieutenantcy, and a large batch of mail was left for the young officer.

The boats had gone into the lagoon, so could not be recalled by signal, and Lieutenant Higgins was forced to at once take his departure, leaving the command to an officer in whom he had not the greatest confidence, for, though a

brave man, he was not skillful, and lacked judgment.

A way sped the dispatch-schooner, leaving the little vessel-of-war at anchor, and soon after night came on and shut out the departing sail from sight.

Then the dim shore line disappeared in the gloom, and the sky became overcast, betokening a storm.

The commanding officer grew nervous, and paced the deck with the air of one who did not like the position he found himself in.

The Mexican pilot, whom they had had on board for two weeks, was ashore, so that in case of a gale, the schooner could only stand out to sea and not run into some harborage near.

If he did this he would have to leave the boats.

There were known to be small Mexican cruisers in some of the small ports along the coast, and if the schooner was seen to have sent her boats away with half her men, then they might run out and attack her.

As the storm threatened to come from the Gulf, and the sea would be too high for the boats to come off, with other attending circumstances, it was not to be wondered at that the officer in command was anxious.

Had another been in command, Lieutenant Higgins, in fact, he would, doubtless, have felt his way in with the lead-line, to an anchorage in the lagoon; but this was not thought of, and as the storm was near at hand, the lieutenant was about to give the order to get up the anchor, set sail and beat off-shore, when a loud hail came from over the waters.

Then oars were heard pulling rapidly, and soon a boat came in sight in the gloom.

It was the cutter with the howitzer, and it was crowded with men.

The midshipman in command had a sad story to tell, for the party had been led by the treacherous Mexican pilot into an ambush of Lagoon Pirates, and, though Midshipman Rickerly had landed with his force and fought them desperately, he had been killed and the men had all been cut down except the few who had escaped in the cutter.

Hardly had the story been told, when, suddenly, out of the darkness, came a large schooner; another instant it was alongside, and after a short, fierce fight, the American vessel was a prize to a Mexican cruiser which had run out of a lagoon and captured her!

Then the anchor was gotten up, sail was set, and the two vessels, the Mexican leading, ran for a haven just as the threatened storm swept over the seas with terrific fury.

CHAPTER X.

DEAD OR ALIVE.

THE master of Crag Eden sat alone in his handsome library, enjoying a cigar after breakfast. He was waiting for his mail, for Hector, the coachman, had gone to the village after it, for Saturday was the mail day for Crag Eden and the plantations in its neighborhood.

Hector soon arrived, and a bundle of letters were brought, along with rolls of newspapers.

The latter were supposed to contain the latest news, so Raynor Rickerly opened one, started, sprung to his feet and ordered his horse. His face was pale, his hands trembling, and, ten minutes after, with the mail pouch in hand, he was dashing at breakneck speed down the Crag road toward Riverdale.

Colonel Burbank, his wife and daughter, saw him coming, and their faces paled, for they knew something must have happened to cause the master of Crag Eden to ride at such headlong speed.

Springing from his horse, he handed the paper to Colonel Burbank, and said, hoarsely:

"Read that, for I cannot."

The colonel read as follows, while Raynor Rickerly threw himself into a chair, and buried his face in his hands:

"THE SCHOONER-OF-WAR COMANCHE LOST!

"WHETHER FOUNDERED AT SEA, DRIVEN ASHORE, OR CAPTURED UNCERTAIN!

"Fate of the Crew Unknown!"

"The dispatch schooner, Carrier Dove, arrived at the flag-ship of the Gulf squadron yesterday and reported visiting the Comanche, schooner-of-war, at her station on the Mexican Coast on her run to Sisal, and delivering orders on board.

"On her return run the Carrier Dove failed to find the Comanche at her station, and knowing that a fearful tornado had swept the Gulf, forcing her to take refuge in a lagoon, she made inquiries regarding the fate of the cruiser, and learned, from fishermen and others, that the cruiser had been seen at her anchorage when night came on, but in the morning was not visible.

"It was hoped by the officers of the dispatch boat that the schooner had run out to sea; but others talked with said that this was not the case, and one fishing-crew asserted that they had seen a vessel-of-war, supposed to be a Mexican, run out just before the storm and attack the American, with what result, however, no one knew.

"If this was the case, then the American was doubtless captured by the Mexicans, though the authorities in Vera Cruz, under a flag of truce sent in, deny this to have been the case.

"A boat was sighted ashore from the decks of the Carrier Dove, and it was sent for.

"It proved to be a cutter from the Comanche, and a howitzer was mounted in her bows.

"Some debris was also picked up, among it a box from the Comanche, and this would lead to the belief that the brave little craft had foundered with all on board, while she also might have been driven ashore.

"The Comanche has figured extensively during the war under her commander, and she carries twelve guns and a crew of ninety men.

"It is upon this vessel that Royal Rickerly, of Virginia, is an officer, and, for gallant services rendered, the Carrier Dove took to him his promotion to a lieutenantcy the very day of the vessel's loss.

"It is to be hoped that if the vessel was wrecked her crew escaped and will turn up; but if she was captured those of them who are alive are now in Mexican prisons, and we all have had reason to know what that means during our war with Mexico.

"If the schooner was swamped at her anchorage, then there is little hope that any of her crew escaped; but we hope for the best."

Such was the article that Colonel Burbank read, in a low, quivering voice.

The father sat silent, stern and with covered face during the reading.

Tears came into the eyes of Mrs. Burbank as she gazed pityingly upon Violet, whose white face was perfectly calm, her hands clasped tightly showing how hard it was to control her emotion.

The colonel's quivering voice as he read proved how deeply he felt.

A dead silence followed the reading, and then, as it was becoming unbearable, Violet said in the calmest tones:

"It is not so bad after all."

"Not so bad!" repeated her father, as all gazed upon her.

"No, for while there is life there is hope. See, there are three chances for, and three against. Swamping, which is the worst—being wrecked, where there is a good chance of escape—and being captured, where they must be prisoners.

"Now I take the chances for life against death, and believe Royal will come out all right, for it has been pretty well proven he is hard to kill."

"Brave words, my noble girl, and they give me hope. Why, you have a courage that shames me, for I looked to the worst at once and held no hope," and Raynor Rickerly grasped the hand of Violet and wrung it until she winced.

"I agree with you, Mr. Rickerly; Violet has given me hope when I saw none."

"And I, too, hope for the best, so let us not despair until we know that all are lost," Mrs. Burbank said.

The face of Raynor Rickerly brightened at once.

It did not seem so bad after all, and the colonel ventured that the schooner might have stood out to sea to escape a lee-shore in a hurricane.

"And if she was captured, our Government will demand a speedy exchange," Mrs. Burbank ventured.

Violet said nothing. She dared not venture more. She had hope, and she had given it for the benefit of Raynor Rickerly, and yet she felt a foreboding of evil; but she would bear up until she knew the truth.

The other papers were then read, bearing upon the affair, and what hope possible was gleaned from them.

The mail for Riverdale now arrived, and a letter came from Royal to Violet.

Then Mr. Rickerly looked over his letters and found one also from his son.

These letters were read, and then treasured more than others had been, for they might be the last they would ever receive from the young sailor.

Suddenly Mr. Rickerly started to his feet, and said:

"I will start at once for Mexico. If my boy is dead, I must know the truth. If he is a prisoner, he must be gotten out of Mexican prisons! Yes, I will return home and depart at once."

A glad light shot into Violet's eyes at this, and, as she held up her lips to kiss him good-by, she said:

"God bless you! Bring him back with you even if he is dead."

An hour after Raynor Rickerly had started for Mexico.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MEXICAN PILOT.

THE pilot of the Comanche was a Mexican who had been picked up in a fishing-smack one night off the coast.

He had been offered the alternative of becoming a prisoner to the Americans, or to serve as coast pilot under good pay.

His patriotism was not deep-seated enough for him to accept imprisonment, so he decided on the good pay and became the pilot.

He really rendered valuable aid until after pay-day; then he piloted the boats to a spring a short distance inland, by way of a lagoon, carrying his earnings in his pockets.

The truth was that the pilot was a lagoon

pirate—a species of human sharks who lived on Mexicans if they must, but who preferred to live upon foreigners if they could.

This particular pilot was a member of a well-organized band of cut-throats, and had planned well, for the capture by the schooner was all pre-arranged, and the Americans had simply carried out his programme, and he had, when the tide set inshore at night, dropped a board or a bottle overboard with written statements of what was going on on the schooner-of-war. These messages were picked up by his watchful comrades, and so it was that the pirates were well-informed.

The water seemed to have gotten out of the casks very rapidly; but perhaps the Mexican could have explained this, and of course he knew just where the casks could be refilled.

As he hinted that a force of Mexican cavalry might be scouting near, it was best to send a good number of the crew along with the water-boats.

This was done, and Royal Rickerly had taken command.

With half her force ashore, of course the schooner would become an easier prey to a Mexican cruiser then lying at Contreras.

The pilot had sent his silent messengers ashore the night before, so when into the lagoon he led the boats and the dark shores shut out the view of the Gulf and the schooner astern he knew his game was secure.

The landing was made. The casks were slung upon hand-barrows, and leaving a guard of two men to each boat, the party took up the march for the spring.

"What a spot for an ambush," muttered Royal, as he saw that the way led between two hills, densely covered with mesquite trees.

Hardly had the words left his lips, when, as from the ground, up sprung half a hundred men on either side, and from the chaparrals was poured a withering volley.

"Stand firm, lads! Fire!" came the order from the young officer, and his men, though greatly rattled, for half a dozen had fallen dead, and as many were wounded, rallied about him.

There was but one thing to do, and that was to retreat.

Royal had seen the Mexican pilot fall at the first fire, and to retrace their way was all that could be done.

The barrows were turned into stretchers for the dead and wounded, and the retreat was begun.

Shots were heard toward the boats, and the sailors were urged to a "double-quick;" but it was no rout; the coolness of the young leader prevented that.

The Mexicans followed, like a pack of coyotes after a wounded buffalo, for they fired from either side and also from behind.

The shots at the boats were now incessant, and the sailors saw, as they came in sight, that their comrades stood at bay before treble their number.

"Ho the boats!" shouted Royal.

"Ay, ay, sir!" responded the coxswain in charge.

"Train that howitzer upon these Mexican devils and fire!"

The howitzer was aimed at the following mass and fired.

It did good execution; but a rush was made, a hand-to-hand fight was begun, and then the brave sailors broke, for they saw their gallant young leader fall.

They reached the cutter, the remnant of the force, shoved off and retreated with all haste down the stream toward the open water to try and regain the schooner.

The pirates followed in their boats, and a running fight was begun.

It is known that the cutter reached the vessel, and what followed, so we will turn to the scene ashore.

There were a dozen dead, and more wounded, who had been left upon the land, strewing the path from the scene of attack to the shore.

In the first heap was the Mexican pilot, Midshipman Royal had believed him dead; but when the Americans retreated, he raised his head and gazed about him. Then sprung to his feet and placing his fingers to his lips, he gave three sharp, long whistles.

They were answered, and soon a horseman arrived. He was a young man, very dark, with long, waving black hair that fell upon his shoulders, a silken sable mustache with drooping ends, and eyes amazingly bright and piercing.

He was gorgeously attired in the *caballero* costume of Mexico, and his broad sombrero tinkled with a fringe of gold-pieces.

In his sash were two Colt's revolvers, just then coming in use, and he wore a jeweled knife and sword of rare workmanship and beauty.

He was a dashing, handsome fellow, but the look of a devil shone in his dark face and piercing eyes.

He rode up to the pilot and said:

"Torros, you have done well; but these fellows have more steel than gold."

"The schooner, however, will have less force to fight with, so the cruiser can readily capture

her, and that will be much in favor of Muerte and his men.

"Now to see that these men get no mercy."

"Ha! they have allowed one boat's crew to escape!" and thrusting the spurs into his horse he rode toward the shore, as he beheld the cutter pulling rapidly away.

Over the line of retreat, caring nothing for dead or wounded, he rode, followed on a run by the traitor-pilot.

But suddenly his horse was reined back, and the eyes of the young Mexican fell upon one who barred his way.

That one was Royal Rickerly, the daring young midshipman who had been left, as his men believed, dead upon the field.

A wound was upon his forehead, and from it trickled a stream of blood.

The midshipman still grasped his sword-hilt, but the blade was broken, and the revolver he held in his hand was unloaded.

Still the young American sailor fearlessly confronted Muerte, the Mexican Marauder.

CHAPTER XII.

THE RECOGNITION.

THE young officer had not been fatally wounded, as was supposed.

He had fallen from a wound on the head, but the bullet had glanced on the frontal bone, run under the scalp and cut its way out again. He recovered his senses to find the path to the shore strewn with the dead and dying of his crew.

He saw the cutter flying down the lagoon, closely pursued; then he knew that all was lost.

Soon the Mexicans began to return along the path of the fight, and his face paled as he discovered that they were robbing both dead and wounded, and were slaying the wounded as well.

With an effort he rose to his feet, and, as he did so, the clatter of hoofs caused him to turn, and he beheld Muerte, the Mexican, almost upon him.

The Mexican seemed fairly startled, and gazed upon the American with evident amazement.

He simply sat in his saddle and gazed fixedly at the American.

"Who are you?" he asked, after a moment, speaking in Spanish that was perfect.

"I am Royal Rickerly, acting lieutenant in the United States Navy. Who are you?" and Royal also spoke Spanish perfectly.

At first the Mexican made no reply, but repeated in a dazed sort of a way:

"Royal Rickerly?"

"So I said."

"You ask who I am?"

"Yes, for I suppose you are a Mexican officer, and I am your prisoner—Hark! do you not hear that cry for mercy! Do you not see that your red-handed devils are killing my wounded men? Can it be that a Mexican officer allows this?"

"I am not a Mexican officer."

"You are a monster, if you do not put an end to that butchery of brave men by cowardly fiends."

The Mexican placed a small silver bugle to his lips and blew several notes sharply, at which all the cut-throats paused in their diabolical work and looked at him.

He gave another signal, which seemed to be an order, by high notes, and the whole band stepped forward as if to form in rank.

"You are too late, for they have killed every wounded man."

"Except yourself."

"I am ready to face my fate, whatever it may be," was the fearless response.

"Royal Rickerly?" said the Mexican, thoughtfully.

"So I said, señor."

"An acting lieutenant in the United States Navy?"

"I am."

"An officer of the American schooner lying off this coast?"

"Yes, and I came ashore for water, under the lead of a treacherous pilot, as I now find him to be, for he now appears as your friend."

"He is," and turning to the pilot, the Mexican chief said:

"Go, Torros, and have the men collect these dead bodies and bury them."

"Bury them, señor?"

"Yes, I said so, and let it be done well, and every paper, valuable and piece of gold found upon their bodies I wish to have given into my keeping, for they are to be returned to this young officer."

"Give up our booty, Señor Captain?"

"Torros, I thought you knew me well enough not to question. Will you obey?"

The young Mexican, as he spoke, drew a revolver from his sash.

It was a quiet movement, but one the traitor pilot appeared to understand, for he darted away with the speed of a deer.

"You are wounded, señor?" said the chief, not unkindly.

"A flesh-wound that stunned me, but did not harm me much."

"I do not like a wound in the head, and my surgeon shall examine yours, for it may bring on fever."

Again the silver bugle was raised to the lips, and a musical order given.

In response a man came quickly out of a clump of mesquite trees, where the Mexican wounded had been carried, and they were not a few.

The stranger was attired as though he might be a Mexican officer; but his sleeves were rolled up, and he appeared as though he had left off work to obey the call.

"Señor, see to this wounded officer," ordered the chief.

The surgeon at once stepped up to Royal and examined the wound carefully.

A peon attendant had followed with a case of instruments, and taking a probe the surgeon thrust it into the wound with a not gentle hand, but the young American did not flinch.

Then he pressed the bone, looked at the wound where the bullet had cut its way out through the scalp, and turned toward the chief.

"Well?"

"The skull is not fractured, Señor Captain, and the wound is slight and will soon heal."

"It is well, so dress it with all care and quickly."

Royal Rickerly sat down upon a fallen tree and the surgeon dressed his wound with considerable skill and care.

"It is done, Señor Captain."

"Thank you."

And the surgeon and his assistant returned to the temporary hospital among the mesquites.

All this time the Mexican commander had remained in the saddle, as though ready to dart away; but now he rode nearer to the American, who arose at his approach and said:

"I have to thank you, señor, for this kindness; but I regret that my poor, brave men were compelled to die."

"It was the fortune of war."

"I have heard that the Mexicans were often merciless to prisoners, but I had hoped that it was not true."

"Now you know to the contrary, señor."

"I am sorry to say that I do; but, may I ask your name and your rank in the army?"

"I am not in the army, señor."

"Ah! in the navy?"

"No."

"Yet you have a command?"

"True; one afloat, another ashore."

"And yet you are not a Mexican officer?"

"No."

"I cannot understand."

"Permit me to explain. Ashore I am Muerte, the Marauder—chief of a band of bandits."

"Ah!"

"Afloat I am Muerte, the Lagoon Pirate."

"Ha! I have heard of you."

"Doubtless. I am not altogether unknown afloat and ashore."

"I have heard of you as the veriest cut-throat, and if you are the man, then I need not wonder that my brave fellows were butchered after they were wounded."

"You are severe, señor; but I have another name, one I am never known by now."

"It is nothing to me, since I now know you as Muerte, and yet it is hard to believe that a man with your face is the monster you are said to be."

The Mexican laughed as he said:

"I would have you know my other name, señor."

"Well?"

"It is Rafael Rickerly—your own twin-brother, Royal!" was the startling announcement.

CHAPTER XIII.

A STRANGE DESTINY.

"My brother! you! you, Rafael Rickerly, my twin brother?"

The words fell slowly from the lips of Midshipman Royal.

The Mexican had dismounted and advanced.

"You do not believe it," he said.

"No."

"You do not think that I am Rafael?"

"I do not. My brother Rafael is dead."

"You think so."

"I know it."

"How do you know it?"

"I saw his body buried."

"That is no proof. You saw a man's body buried, but it was not my body."

Royal shook his head.

"You still doubt?"

"How can I but doubt? I saw one buried whom I believed to be my brother."

"What motive could I have in claiming to be your brother? Let us drop Spanish, and see how I speak English."

"You do speak it perfectly."

"Well, to convince you, let me say that I was supposed to have been drowned, was I not?"

"Yes."

"But, long after, our father got word that I had been stolen from my home by some Gypsies."

"True."

"As to why I was taken we will not now speak, but I was carried to the West. My fa-

ther was written to that I had died; and more—he went to the place and found a grave said to have been mine.

"A youth's remains were found in it, but it was impossible to recognize more than the color of hair and size of the form, and so it was taken home and buried as my body."

"That is true."

"Our old home was Crag Eden, situated upon a cliff overhanging the river, and I can tell you much to prove to you that I am Rafael, so that you can no longer doubt."

"I did not die, as the Gypsies said, but was taken by them into New Mexico, where, after a long while, I made my escape, for I wanted to return to my home; but I did not break away from them until I had taken the life of a Gypsy, and that, with the life of thieving and wickedness I had been compelled to lead, made me hardened, I fear."

"After numerous adventures, I reached the sea-coast at Corpus Christi, and there shipped on a vessel bound for New York."

"It was wrecked on the Florida Coast, and in despair I joined a band of wreckers and dwelt with them a couple of years."

"Well, that made a thorough sailor of me, but it did not improve my character, I assure you."

"I then joined a band of Cuban filibusters, having felt my unworthiness to return home, for I had neglected opportunities of escaping when I should have done so."

"We ended disastrously in Cuba, and I fled to Mexico in an open boat with a few companions."

"Somehow Fate seemed to lead me on for evil, as those who were my comrades were bad fellows, and it was not long before I took to smuggling along the coast."

"I soon became a junior officer, fought a duel with my chief and killed him, after which I stepped into his shoes."

"So it went with me, Royal, from bad to worse, until now I am Muerte the Marauder, ashore, and Muerte the Pirate, afloat, for I have a band of Mexican cut-throats on the land, and several trim vessels in the lagoons that are a terror on the Gulf shores."

"I have a ranch as well, and live like a gentleman when I so please; but, I like this life of deviltry and adventure, and, having become a Mexican, am of course the foe of my own race."

"Will you believe me now, Royal—believe that I am your unfortunate brother, who has gone to the bad, while you have become a man of honor?"

"I knew you when I saw you face to face, and I tell you that I was flooded with memories that nearly broke my heart."

"Do you fear to take a robber's hand in welcome, Brother Royal?"

"No, no, indeed, my poor, dear Rafael, for now I know that you are my brother. Fate has been unkind to you, and a cruel destiny has driven you from the right."

"I do not condemn you, Rafael, but the unfortunate circumstances that have made you what you are. Ah! what a life has been yours!"

And Royal Rickerly grasped his brother's hand.

"And our father?"

The lips of the young outcast quivered as he spoke.

"He is well, and lives alone at Crag Eden."

"Dear old Crag Eden!"

"I have much to tell you, Rafael, of the dear old place and the changes that have taken place there, and—"

"Come, I have forgotten my hospitality in the joy of our meeting. Come with me to my den, and you will not find it uncomfortable, I assure you."

He led the way as he spoke into the chaparral, and there were a number of wild-looking men gathered together overlooking the surgeon, who was still dressing the wounds of those who had been brought to him.

The Mexicans scowled at Royal Rickerly, and one or two made an insulting remark about the "accursed Gringos."

But a word from the young chief silenced them, and a horse was ordered for the American officer.

Just then a man dashed up upon horseback and said:

"One boat escaped, Captain Muerte."

"It will make little difference, except that you men lost the chance of a little more blood-letting, and the cruiser's people will have to do it for you to-night."

"What! will a Mexican cruiser attack our schooner to-night?" cried Royal.

"Yes, and take her; but we are going to have a storm, so we will ride on."

And the Mexican chief led the way further into the interior, Royal Rickerly riding in silence by his side.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BROTHERS.

THE "Den" of the Marauders, as Muerte called his retreat, was a hill in the midst of a dense chaparral.

The approach was by two paths cut through

the dense undergrowth, and one of which could be used as a way of retreat in case of an attack.

The hill arose sharply from the midst of the chaparral, was dotted with heavy timber only, and being several acres in size was a good place for the retreat of a robber band.

There were small cabins made of saplings on the hill, a large spring of finest water, a meadow land for the stock, and a lookout-tree, or rather, a rude ladder leading up into a large tree, where there was a perch from which a man could obtain an extensive view not only of the land, but of the Gulf and coast for miles.

As it was night Royal Rickerly could only guess at his surroundings, and, as the storm came on with great violence, he was willing enough to find a retreat in the cabin of the guerrilla chief.

"You are welcome, my brother, to my humble home, for this, and the cabin of my little vessel are all the homes I have," said Muerte, as he led the young officer into his cabin.

It was by no means so humble a home as the words of Captain Muerte suggested, for it was fitted up with innumerable articles of luxury and comfort, and a peon servant soon set before the two brothers, so widely different, so strangely met, a most sumptuous repast, with finest wines that Royal Rickerly could not but praise.

"And this is your home, Rafael?" said Royal, sadly.

"Yes."

"Of course, now that you have met me, you will give up this wild life and return to America?"

"Why should I?"

"For every reason, for father is very rich, Crag Eden is far more charming than ever, and you will find a warm welcome there."

"A robber?"

"No one need know this, for I tell you, Rafael, your secret will never be hinted at by me."

"Yes, you must come, for you will have all that heart could wish, and you can marry some lovely girl, as I intend to do, and be happy."

"You?"

"Yes, for I am engaged to the daughter of Colonel Burbank, of Riverdale."

"I remember Riverdale, and Colonel Burbank, too, for I have often seen him pass along the highway near the river, and we met him hunting."

"Yes."

"And I remember his little daughter, too, Violet was her name, I think, and you remember how we used to sit in the thicket and see her ride by on her little pony, and I said she was my sweetheart."

"I recall it now, Rafael; but let me tell you how I met her and became engaged to her," and Royal Rickerly told the story of his adventure and love affair with the pretty young heiress of Riverdale.

The Pirate of the Chaparrals listened with the deepest interest to all, and sighed, as though sad at the thought of how different had been his life from that of his brother.

"Alas, Royal, it cannot be for me to lead a life of happiness in dear old Virginia."

"Let me tell you frankly that I fear I am doomed to this existence forever."

"No, no, Rafael, for you are not to blame for the past."

"You did not bring your evil life upon yourself, for you were simply the football of cruel circumstances, and should not reflect upon yourself what you could not help."

"You are an American, not a Mexican, and can go back home with honor, for no whisper of mine shall hint of your past."

"You must do it, Rafael, and Crag Eden shall be yours, and I will take Viewlands when I marry, and I am only sorry that Violet has not a sister for you to fall in love with; but unfortunately there are few such beings as Violet."

The young Mexican's face lost its look of reckless defiance that seemed habitual to it, and became strangely sad-looking, as he listened to his brother's words.

At last he sprang to his feet and said:

"We will see, Royal, we will see; but now I am a Mexican, and must do my duty as such, and I must hold you a prisoner of war until I can release you as I wish."

"There, that is your hammock, so make yourself comfortable for the night, as I must go my rounds."

"Remember, you are a prisoner, but my guest as well, and need have no dread of the future."

He pressed Royal's hand and left the cabin, drawing his cloak closer about him as he stepped out into the darkness and storm.

Dawn came and the storm was over.

Royal Rickerly awoke to find that his brother had not returned during the night; but by the time that he had refreshed himself with a bath of cold water brought by the peon servant from the spring, the young captain rode up.

He looked travel-stained and weary, appearing as though he had been up all night.

Greeting his brother with most kindly manner, he called to the peon to have breakfast, and then said:

"Royal, I have bad news for you."

"Ah!"

"Your schooner was captured last night."

"I feared it."

"Yes; a Mexican cruiser lay in the port and had no crew, so I furnished the men from my band."

"The Government is very willing to accept the help of pirates, when they need their aid, then it helps me with the Junta to be of service, while I get a better chance to strike a blow for our own good."

"Tell me of the capture of the schooner."

"Well, the boat escaped from my men and reached the schooner, which, fearful the storm would drive her ashore, her commander was preparing to run out to sea, when suddenly the Mexican cruiser boarded her."

"And carried her?"

"Certainly."

"She had but half a crew, and it was a surprise," said Royal, apologizing for his brother officers having been captured with his vessel.

"Oh, they fought well; but it was no use, for Mexicans never attack a superior force, and in fact are seldom willing to take even chances."

"And the prisoners, where are they?"

"In the port a league from here, if there were any survivors."

"Any survivors!" cried Royal Rickerly, in a tone of horror.

"Well, I told you that they fought well, and more, you had an opportunity of judging that Mexicans prefer to carry out the old saying that dead men tell no tales."

Royal Rickerly was deeply moved.

The day before he had been an officer on a fine little vessel-of-war, and a few hours had made him a prisoner, slain many of his brother officers and men, how many he could only guess, and lost to them their cruiser.

It was a sudden and sad ending; but it was one of the fortunes of war and must be expected, and in his misfortune Royal Rickerly at least had the satisfaction of knowing that the disaster had found for him his twin-brother, whom he had so long mourned as dead.

CHAPTER XV.

A MEXICAN DUNGEON.

ALL day the Mexican Bandit Chief was away from his retreat, and Royal Rickerly was left to his own thoughts.

He was told by his brother that he could walk about the hill, and all in the cabin was at his disposal for his amusement.

There were books in plenty, Spanish, French and English publications, a guitar, which he played well, and innumerable little things, souvenirs doubtless of robberies upon sea and land.

There were several exquisite paintings, and an easel and palette suggested that the Mexican chief amused himself by painting at times, and some excellent sketches of landscape and marine views bore the name of Muerte, showing him as the artist.

Of course Royal's thoughts were none of the pleasantest; but he was determined upon one point, and that was to make his brother return with him to Crag Eden.

The peon served him a very tempting dinner at noon, and a *siesta* in the afternoon refreshed him.

Then he drummed on the guitar, sketched, for he possessed the same talent that his brother did, and made a faithful picture of the retreat of the outlaws.

At last, as the sun neared the horizon, his brother appeared.

He certainly had been on the go all day, for he looked very weary, and had little to say.

But he was kind and seemed to wish to hear Royal talk.

At an early hour they retired, and never awoke until called by the peon for breakfast.

Muerte sprang to his feet in the best of humors.

He appeared to be wholly refreshed, and enjoyed his breakfast.

Thus the days passed until a week had gone by and one night Muerte returned from a long ride with a clouded brow.

The two brothers seemed now to thoroughly understand each other, and Royal had won from Rafael a pledge to go home with him when they could do so.

Now Muerte looked troubled, and said:

"Royal, I fear our conversation about leaving here soon was overheard and reported, for no one knows here who his friend is."

"Ah! and can it get you into harm?"

"I think not; but I would like to say now, while I have the opportunity, that should you be prevented from leaving just now, and make your escape, I wish you to pledge me your word that you will not, under any circumstances, speak of having found me."

"But, Rafael, I—"

"Hold! I mean just what I say, for I do not wish to have my existence known until I give you permission to tell."

"I have reasons for this, Royal, and you must do as I ask you."

There was a determined look in the face of Muerte, and his brother replied:

"Of course, Rafael, I will give you the pledge, for I wish you to go with me."

"It may not be possible, for, if the Mexican commanders have their way, they will put us both in prison, you as an American prisoner, I as a Mexican who anticipated deserting."

"If we are thus treated, you may be sure that we will not be allowed to be together; but I have friends, and to escape will be the one thing to hope for, and if we do, it will not be together that it can be done."

"I may come afterward, if you escape; but I wish your pledge not to speak of my being alive, until—"

"Not even to my father, Rafael?"

"Not to a soul."

"I will do as you ask; but do you expect trouble?"

"Yes, I may as well be frank and admit it."

"But why?"

"I said that our conversation had been overheard, and it was reported to the Mexican commander."

"He naturally feels that I would escape with you, and, with my knowledge of Mexican movements, that I would be invaluable to the Americans."

"It would therefore be better to execute me as a pirate, than have me go to the enemy as a traitor, you see."

Royal Rickerly made no reply.

After all was his scheme to escape, carrying his brother with him, to fall through with?

He hoped for the best.

But, even as he hoped a party of horsemen appeared in sight, riding out of the pathway from the chaparral, and they came up the hill toward the cabin.

The face of Muerte changed color at sight of them.

"They are Mexican Regulars," he said.

Royal made no reply, and the Mexican Lancers came on up to the cabin.

There were two officers and a score of men, and the one in command glanced at Royal Rickerly, then at the Mexican chief.

"You are Muerte, captain of the Marauders?" he said, looking at a slip of paper he held in his hand.

"I am Captain Muerte, the ally of the Mexican Regulars when they need me," was the reply.

"Ten days ago you captured some prisoners, a party that landed from an American vessel-of-war?"

"I captured an officer, señor; the men were slain."

"And the officer?"

"Is here," and he motioned to Royal Rickerly.

"You did not send him to headquarters?"

"Why should I, for was he not my prisoner?"

"General Escobedo thinks differently."

"What would the Señor General Escobedo have?"

"That I return with your prisoner, and also arrest you, Señor Captain Muerte."

"Ha! do you mean this?"

"Most certainly."

"On what charge, señor, am I arrested?" and the eyes of the young outlaw leader flashed.

"Upon the charge that you intended to arrange the escape of this American prisoner, and thereby betray to our foes the coast wing of our army, which would enable them to land and do us much damage."

"You are a pirate, Señor Muerte, so the general expects you to sell out to the highest bidder for your services."

The young chief made no reply.

To resist was useless, for though he had men within the call of his bugle, who could rally around him and fairly sweep the party of Regulars off of the earth, there was a power behind them that he dared not confront.

So he smiled, and said:

"I accept the situation as it appears, Señor Captain; but you will find that Muerte is not easily put down."

Then, turning to his brother, he continued:

"Señor Americano, we must submit for the present, but when General Escobedo knows the true situation, I think there will be no trouble."

"Now, Señor Captain, we are your prisoners."

"I have orders to iron you both, señor."

"Ha! but so be it."

"I do not fear steel and lead, so why should I the contact of iron?"

He held out his hands, and in an instant a Lancer had dismounted and clasped a pair of handcuffs upon the wrists.

Midshipman Royal Rickerly uttered no word, and in silence submitted to the indignity of the irons, as had his brother, the Mexican chief.

He knew that resistance would but make his situation worse.

Then they were mounted upon Mexican horses, and taken away from the robber camp.

That night Royal Rickerly was placed alone in a Mexican dungeon, and he could not but recall the lines of Dante:

"He that enters here
Leaves Hope behind."

CHAPTER XVI.

HOPE YET.

TIME dragged its weary length along, after the departure of Royal Rickerly for the Mexican frontier.

He had made hasty arrangements for his departure, but carried with him Darius as his valet.

The journey in those days was a long one; but a boat was taken down the river from Pittsburg, and upon arriving at New Orleans, a vessel was found ready to sail for the mouth of the Rio Grande.

Joining the army of reserve, Raynor Rickerly discovered the situation to be far worse than he had been led to believe.

He was told that the schooner-of-war, upon which his son had been an officer, was supposed to have gone down at sea.

He suggested that she might have been captured, but no news of such a happening had come into the American lines.

At his earnest entreaty a flag of truce was sent into the Mexican camp, asking if the cruiser had been captured.

The reply was returned that no such vessel had been taken by the Mexican Navy.

The master of Crag Eden was in a quandary, and his distress was great.

But he was not a man to give up a half-finished work.

So he chartered a vessel, at his own expense, put a good crew on board and ran along the coast to the point where the little cruiser's post of duty had been.

He made inquiry of all vessels-of-war and merchantmen he fell in with, and upon reaching the fleet urged the commodore commanding to send ashore and make all inquiries of the Mexican authorities.

The reply was that had such a vessel been taken, the prisoners would be in the hands of the Mexican authorities, and no such report of prisoners having been taken had been received at headquarters.

The vessel under the command of the master of Crag Eden fairly haunted the Mexican Coast for a month or more, and no news of the missing crew could be picked up.

One night a fishing-smack was captured as it was endeavoring to slip by in the darkness.

The skipper was none other than Torros, the treacherous Mexican pilot, who had been anxious to discover what that vessel wanted off the coast, and so had determined to find out.

He had seen that she was unarmed and had but few men on board.

Perhaps he could lead her into a trap.

As most Mexicans of the lower class look alike, and Torros had shaved off his beard, cut his long hair short and otherwise disguised himself, he did not fear being recognized as the schooner-of-war's treacherous pilot.

Besides, he was very well convinced that the crew of that vessel were in no position to harm him.

So he allowed his little smack with three men on board to be captured.

She had a cargo of fish, and was not an unacceptable prize.

Torros was taken before Raynor Rickerly, who questioned him closely.

He had seen such a schooner, oh yes, for he had sold fish on board often.

"Did he remember her officers?"

"Oh, yes, and he described them perfectly."

"Where was the schooner?"

"That he did not know; but there had been a heavy storm one night, sweeping down from the Gulf, and the next morning the schooner was not at her anchor."

"Had she been lost?"

"That was what he thought, or else been ordered away by her Government."

"Were there any Mexican cruisers on the coast?"

"None to hunt, señor," was the reply.

So Torros, the cunning scamp, was paid for the information he had not given, he sold his fish and was allowed to go, and he had discovered all that he cared to know about the mysterious unarmed vessel which had haunted the coast for over a month.

Despairing of ever getting tidings, and fearing, yet hoping against such fear, that the schooner and all on board had gone down at sea, or had been captured, and her officers and crew were in Mexican dungeons, the master of Crag Eden determined to retrace his way homeward.

He had spent considerable money, and he had gained little more information than he had known at the first.

So back to Crag Eden he and Darius wended their way, and one Sabbath evening, soon after nightfall, a knock at the door of Riverdale Mansion ushered in Raynor Rickerly.

A bright fire of logs blazed upon the library hearth, and Colonel Burbank, in slippers and dressing-gown was asleep in his easy-chair.

His wife, still a lovely-faced woman, was reading, and Violet was seated on the floor, her eyes upon the fire, for she was in a deep reverie.

The moment that the master of Crag Eden

entered, every eye glanced behind him, to see if there was another one there.

But the face of Raynor Rickerly had grown sterner in the four months that he had been away, and his hair had whitened considerably.

"Mr. Rickerly!" and Violet was at his side, her hand grasping his.

"Welcome home, Rickerly," cried Colonel Burbank, springing from his chair, while Mrs. Burbank also greeted him, her eyes glancing piteously into his own, and then at her daughter, for she read what the returned father had to tell.

"When did you return?" asked Colonel Burbank, as he felt the silence growing painful.

"But an hour ago I arrived at Crag Eden, so came right over."

"It was kind of you; but do you bring good news, Rickerly?"

"Alas, no!"

"He is not dead! I know he is not dead," moaned Violet.

"Heaven grant it be so; but I know nothing, absolutely nothing," and in a low, earnest tone he went on to tell of his search for his missing son.

"And no one has been seen, or heard of from the schooner?"

"Not one."

"This would look as though she had gone down at sea with all on board," said Colonel Burbank.

"No, not as our war is with Mexico, for I have learned much regarding our foes, and it may be that she was captured by night, and all who were not slain put in prison."

"And again, she may have been driven ashore, and the officers and crew become prisoners, and that means no escape for them until the end of the war."

"Heaven grant it may soon end," fervently said Mrs. Burbank.

As for Violet, she had said nothing.

She had begun to pace the room, and to and fro, behind the chairs of those who sat facing the fire, she walked.

At last she came to the chair of the master of Crag Eden, and said:

"Do not despair, keep up hope, for somehow I feel that the one we all love is not dead."

"Yes, my heart bids me hope, and I will hope on forever."

CHAPTER XVII.

BACK TO CAPTIVITY.

SEVERAL days after his return from Mexico, the master of Crag Eden again rode hastily over to Riverdale, for he had received his mail, and there was both joy and sorrow commingled in his face, as he entered the sitting-room where Colonel Burbank, his wife and daughter, were seated.

"He is not dead; he has turned up, only to be lost again!"

Such were the startling words that greeted the family, and in an instant all was excitement, while Raynor Rickerly sat down and unfolded the paper from which he had gleaned some very important information.

Then aloud he read as follows:

"A MYSTERIOUS CIRCUMSTANCE!"

"THE BOLD ACT AND RECAPTURE OF A GALLANT YOUNG OFFICER!"

"The following news comes to us directly from the American fleet off the Mexican Coast, and from a very reliable source:

"The American brig-of-war Mohican was sent on a special mission to a certain point on the Mexican Coast, where it was said a schooner was being fitted out as a privateer to wage war upon our commerce at sea."

"The orders of the Mohican's commander were to hide in some lagoon, set watchers ashore, and when the Mexican schooner ran out, to give chase and attack her."

"The brig found a secure hiding place, and men were set ashore to watch the entrance to the harbor where it was said the schooner was being armed."

"One of these men on duty was approached by a man wearing a Mexican sombrero and cloak, and yet he spoke English without an accent."

"He asked to be taken at once on board the brig, as he had important business to communicate to her commander."

"The seaman went with him, and he was soon in the cabin of the brig."

"There he made this statement:

"I am Midshipman Royal Rickerly, and escaped from a Mexican dungeon only a few days ago."

"I speak Spanish perfectly, so passed for an army officer on leave, and I found out that the presence of your vessel in this lagoon is known, and arrangements are being made to attack her in boats to-morrow night."

"There is a Mexican schooner ready for sea, all except her crew, now lying at an isolated anchorage in the harbor, and ashore are a party of American officers and seamen held as prisoners by the Mexicans."

"I can lead a boat expedition to-night to seize the schooner, and twenty men can do this, while forty more can land and release the prisoners, a hundred in number."

"The schooner is a fine one, well-armed, said to be very fast, and is fitted out for a six months' cruise."

"By capturing the craft to-night you save yourself from being attacked at your anchorage by an overwhelming force to-morrow night, and you re-

lease a hundred prisoners, get a fine prize that is to go against American commerce, and you strike the enemy a severe blow; but all should be done promptly."

"The captain of the brig was glad to get the chance to carry out so bold a plot, and he at once gave the orders for the men to take the boats, all fully armed, and sent for two of his officers to accompany the daring young midshipman, whom the captain also had the pleasure of informing he had been promoted to a lieutenantcy."

"As to the fate of his vessel, Lieutenant Royal Rickerly said nothing stating that he would give full particulars at another time; but that the schooner had been captured by the Mexicans there seemed little doubt."

"Under his Mexican garb the young American wore his naval uniform, though it was decidedly the worse for wear."

"He was darkly bronzed and seemed haggard after his imprisonment; but was full of pluck and eager to strike a severe blow against the Mexicans."

"Half an hour after his arrival on the brig, Lieutenant Royal Rickerly left her side with four boats crowded with men."

"The launch, with twenty men, was to attack the schooner, while the remainder of the force, under Lieutenant Rickerly, were to land, march upon the adobe building in which were the prisoners and set them free."

"The boat party had been gone little over an hour, when a hail was heard off the shore, and a voice in English asked to have boats sent ashore, as there were a number of Americans there who had escaped from the Mexican prison back in the town."

"Treachery was at first feared, but a young officer knew some who were on board the brig, called them by name, and the boats were sent ashore and soon over a hundred prisoners were on the vessel's decks."

"The officer stated that they had killed their guard and escaped, without causing an alarm, for they had heard of the presence of the brig on the coast."

"The escaped prisoners also stated that the schooner was ready for sea; but that they feared trouble to the shore party, if their going had become known."

"Lieutenant Rickerly had not been a prisoner with them, nor did they know where he had made his escape from, or aught about the fate of his vessel and crew."

"Hardly had all gotten on board the brig, when distant firing was heard, and it was rapid, heavy and fierce."

"An hour after, as the crew of the brig were on the alert to welcome back the victors, as they hoped, boats were seen approaching, but no schooner appeared in sight."

"That the land force had failed all believed; but the captain hailed as they drew near in the darkness."

"No answer was returned to the hail, and expecting that they might be foes, attempting to board him under the guise of his own boats, the captain sent his men to quarters with a rush."

"And just in time, for those in the boats were Mexicans, and there were a hundred of them, too."

"They reached the deck of the brig, and but for the coming of the escaped prisoners another story would have to be told, for with her weakened crew the craft would certainly have been captured."

"As it was, the Mexicans were beaten off with difficulty, and then, to save his vessel, as other boats appeared in sight, the brig's commander got up anchor, set sail and stood out to where he had good room to maneuver."

"He did not desert his boats until he knew the shore party must have all been captured, and he saw that there were a number of small vessels getting ready to run down with the armed schooner to attack him."

"As the bar had not depth of water enough upon it for the brig to cross, there was no need of seeking the aid of larger vessels from our fleet, so the gallant captain was forced to leave three-score brave fellows behind him, though as an offset he brought away over a hundred escaped prisoners."

"It is to be hoped that Lieutenant Rickerly will not be recognized by any one who knew him as an escaped prisoner, as his fate would be death, and that at once, we fear."

"We hope, in our next issue, to be able to give our readers more news about this unfortunate and thrilling affair, and our deepest sympathies are with the brave Lieutenant Royal Rickerly, who escaped from a Mexican dungeon but to return to it almost immediately."

"Lieutenant Rickerly will be remembered as a young officer whose name has frequently appeared connected with daring deeds during the war with Mexico."

A silence that was painful fell upon all when Raynor Rickerly had finished reading this strange account, and it was only broken by Violet, who said, firmly:

"I told you that he was not dead, and that I had hope."

"Even now my hope has not gone, for Royal will return; it was not intended for him to die in a Mexican dungeon, I am sure."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A MAN'S REMORSE.

FOR a long time the four persons in the library at Riverdale, sat talking over the fate of the young sailor.

His having escaped from a Mexican prison once gave them hope that he could do so again, while his being captured with the boat party would doubtless keep him from being recognized as an escaped American, especially as it did not appear that he had been imprisoned at the scene of his last adventure."

Of course there was a possibility that he might have been wounded, or killed; but this those who hoped would not think of."

At any rate he would have company in his

imprisonment, and the resources of the young officer for taking care of himself were well known, and it was agreed that he would soon turn up again."

The master of Crag Eden did speak of going again to Mexico, but he was dissuaded from this step by Colonel and Mrs. Burbank, who felt that it would be a useless move on his part, as no good could possibly be gained by it."

It was late when Raynor Rickerly mounted his horse and rode back to Crag Eden."

There he read to Black Pink and the other house-servants, the account in the newspaper, and every one of them were so hopeful that "Marse Royal would turn up all right," that the father gained hope most thoroughly, and muttered to himself:

"If that woman lived now, and he was missing, then I would dread indeed; but she is in her grave, thank Heaven, and the risks he runs are not from accursed plots against his life."

And so time went by and a month had passed, but no news came of the missing young sailor."

The papers had been unable to glean any more news of the unfortunates who had made the boat attack, and it was, as usual, not known to the Mexicans, or at least they said so, though they were compelled to admit the escape of the party who had reached the brig, but claimed that the attack on that vessel had been made by lagoon pirates."

Each day that passed brought a more anxious look to the face of Raynor Rickerly, who longed for tidings of his son, and began in his heart to dread the worst, while Violet, in spite of her assumed cheerfulness in the presence of her parents and of the master of Crag Eden, was wont to take long walks and drives alone, and at such times she would seek a quiet retreat and give way to her sorrow in tears."

One afternoon Raynor Rickerly was returning to his home from a ride to the town."

His face was stern, his brow thoughtful, for he was riding along a road he had not been over for many years."

The last time had been before his marriage, when he had gone to meet Roma Leigh, the Gypsy Queen at their trysting-place."

What had impelled him to take that road, miles back, when he came to where the highway forked, he knew not, for it was fully two miles longer than the one direct to Crag Eden."

Reaching a path that branched off into the forest, he halted."

He remembered it but too well."

It was the path that led to the arbor on the cliff, the scene of his many meetings with Roma Leigh."

Night was yet an hour away, and still impelled by an ungovernable impulse he rode in to the path."

It was overgrown now, for then his going and coming and hers had kept it well-worn."

He went slowly along, and the impulse was upon him to revisit that old scene on the cliff."

He had not been there since the day when Roma Leigh had made her threat to cause him to rue the day when he cast her aside."

But why should he not trample bygone memories under his feet?

Why should he allow the memory of that woman to haunt him?

True, she had died a fearful death, a death of appealing for mercy to him, and he had been deaf to her appeals."

But had she not poisoned his wife?

Had she not stolen his son and put him to death, as he believed?

If had felt revengeful, it was because she had struck him in the heart, by taking from him those he loved."

He remembered how, fearing her, he had lived like a hunted wolf in his home, how his wife had been afraid to go away from Crag Eden, and they both had felt dread of evil to their two splendid boys."

And that fear had not been without cause."

That fear had been realized most fearfully in the taking away of his wife and one son."

"If in revenge I killed her, then my sufferings demanded that it should be so."

Such had been his argument with himself, to ease his conscience."

But Raynor Rickerly could not drown remorse, and though he felt his secret was known but to himself, he suffered."

The memory of the dark-eyed, beautiful queen would come to him often in the silent hours of the night, and groans of anguish would surge up from his heart as he recalled her fearful death, while he stood gazing mercilessly upon her."

He had covered up his tracks well."

Her murder could never be traced to him, for he had taken good care of that."

The secret was locked up in his own breast, and it would go to the grave with him."

"If it were not for Royal, my noble boy, I would not care how soon the grave shut over that secret forever," he muttered, as he rode along the path."

Dismounting at the foot of the ridge, he agoihed his horse to the same tree where years cotehe had many a time fastened the animal he d hr to the trysting-place."

The tree had grown much in the years that

had passed since then, and he could with difficulty make his way along the path leading to the cliff."

At last he came in sight of the lookout, on which was the arbor."

With ax, hatchet and nails, Roma Leigh himself had built that arbor."

And they had built it well, indeed, for it had not become a ruin in the many years that had passed since then."

Vines had grown upon its sides and creeping over the roof had made it a perfect retreat, the entrances being almost closed."

As he neared the arbor he paused, and with his handkerchief wiped the sweat from his brow, for thoughts, not the heat, had brought it there."

He knew that a few more paces would bring him to a spot but too well remembered."

He would stand where Roma Leigh had so often stood with him, gazing out over the magnificent scene before them."

Had that scene changed in the years that he counted, changed as he had?

He would see, and nerving himself to enter the arbor he stepped quickly forward."

Then he halted suddenly, uttered a wild cry and staggered, rather than ran, back down the path he had come, sprung into his saddle and fled like the wind as though he had seen a ghost."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE SPECTER.

WHAT had caused the sudden flight of the master of Crag Eden from the old arbor on the cliff had been a being upon whom his eyes had fallen when he had stepped into the little retreat, so filled with bitter memories of the past to him."

Standing just outside of the arbor, upon the edge of the cliff, and seemingly unmindful of the fact that a sudden dizziness would dash her to death far below, was a woman."

A woman, and yet a child, it seemed she was, for scarcely out of her teens she seemed."

A bronzed complexion, tinged with the glow of perfect health, a form that was the perfection of symmetry, hair as black as midnight, eyes of splendor and full of passion, small hands and feet and the bearing of a queen, for such was this lovely being."

Her dress was rich in the extreme, the bodice fitting close, the skirt falling just below the knees, the shapely limbs being incased with morocco leggings."

About her waist was a sash of woven gold, and her neck fairly blazed with strings of precious stones, while jewels were upon her fingers, in her hair, and gemmed pins held up the waves of sable hair."

A dirk with gold scabbard and jeweled hilt was stuck in her sash, and in her hand she carried a long black staff on one end of which was a spear-like head, making it a dangerous weapon, and upon the other a small ivory skull and cross-bones."

This strange woman had not heard the approach of Raynor Rickerly, but seemed to be wholly lost in reverie, from which she was awakened most rudely by his shout of terror, for such it seemed."

She started, turned quickly, and threw her staff in rest, as though to stand upon the defensive against a foe."

But she heard the rapid fall of feet, and springing through the arbor beheld glimpses of the master of Crag Eden fairly flying down the path."

She watched his flight until he disappeared, and then quietly followed on after him."

What was in her thoughts her face did not reveal, but there was a strange smile curling her full red lips."

In the mean time Raynor Rickerly had reached the highway."

He then slackened his desperate pace and glanced nervously about him."

But seeing no one following, he became more calm, and said bitterly:

"Fool! fool that I am!"

"It was but the fancy of my fevered brain, called up by my thinking of her, and the fact that I was seeking a spot I have not dared to go to in many long years."

"Why, I am the veriest coward to allow my fears to get the better of me thus."

"I will go back and— No, night is near at hand, and I will await the morrow."

"Then I will go to the cliff, yes, I will go every day until I school myself to feel that I could stand even the sight of her specter, if such things could be."

He had now turned a bend in the road which brought him again into the main highway running along the river-bank."

He could also see Crag Eden upon the lofty ridge that overhung the river, and knew that he would have to ride half a mile down the banks to a ford, to reach his home."

But he again came to a sudden halt, for not far from him he beheld a camp."

It had not been there in the morning when he left Crag Eden."

It was a lovely spot for a camp-ground, and a picturesque encampment it was, with its odd

tents, gay wagons, staked-out horses and many people, who were grouped about under the trees or around the camp-fires, upon which were being cooked their evening meal.

In the center of the camp was one tent larger than the others, and upon its strange devices and unknown characters were painted.

"My God! it is the camp of the Romana Gypsies!"

"They have come again to their camping-ground, which Roma Leigh bought, and under the shadow of Crag Eden."

"In Heaven's name, why have they come here?"

"What can their devilish motive be now?"

"Ha! have I forgotten the specter I saw on the cliff?"

"In the name of Heaven, what accursed mystery lies at the bottom of all this?—for now I almost believe, as I see these people here, that it was the specter of Roma Leigh, the Gypsy Queen."

"It certainly cannot be her in the flesh, for did I not kill her?"

"Yes, and more, this specter was young and beautiful, just as I had known Roma Leigh in the far bygone."

"Ah! here is one of the accursed Gypsy tribe, and I will question him."

As he thus said, a man came along the highway, leading a horse from the river-bank, where he had been to water the animal.

He was clad in the picturesque garb of the Gypsies, and gazed at the face of Raynor Rickerly with seeming interest.

"Good-day, my friend, are you one of these Gypsies?" said Raynor Rickerly.

"Does not my face tell you so?"

"Yes, and your garb also; but when came you here?"

"At noon."

"And why?"

"To camp."

"Do you know upon whose land you are encamped?"

"Yes."

"To whom does it belong?"

"To my tribe, the Romana Gypsies."

"I am not so sure of that."

"I am."

"Who is your chief?"

"The Romana Gypsies have no chief."

"Your king then?"

"We have no king, except by courtesy."

"Who is your ruler?"

"Our Queen."

Royal Rickerly started, but asked:

"And her name?"

"Roma Leigh."

Again the planter started, and his voice sunk to a whisper, as he said:

"Roma Leigh?"

"Yes."

"Why, that was the name of your old Queen."

"It is the name of our Queen now."

"It strikes me that I heard that she, your Queen, was dead."

"A Gypsy Queen never dies."

"About how old is your Queen?"

"Gypsies live not by years, and our Queen is ever young, ever beautiful."

"Is she in camp now?" and Raynor Rickerly looked nervously toward the large tent.

"No, she has gone for a walk in the forest, but she will soon return."

"Would you have your fortune read by our Queen?"

"No, no, not this evening."

"I thank you—good-night," and with an anxious glance in the direction he had come, as though he expected to see a specter, the master of Crag Eden rode on, while he said in a voice hoarse with emotion:

"After all, that woman yet lives!"

"It was no specter that I saw."

"God above! what is there of evil in store for me now?"

CHAPTER XX.

HAUNTED.

To his grand home rode Raynor Rickerly, and yet even the brilliantly-lighted library and its luxurious surroundings could not drive from him the memory of the form he had seen upon the cliff, standing in the shadow of the arbor.

His dinner remained uneaten, but he drank far more than was his wont, for he was a temperate man, hoping that wine would drown recollection.

But it would not, and at last he retired to his bed-chamber to see if he could not forget all in slumber.

His room overlooked the river and the valley, and the camp-fires of the Gypsies shone brightly before him as he gazed out upon the scene.

"They must go soon," he muttered, and he took himself to bed.

But sleep would not come to him.

Each time that he seemed about to sink into repose he saw the form of Roma Leigh, the Gypsy Queen.

He did not see it as upon the cliff; but he beheld her seated in the chair which he had purchased from a madman, its inventor, to clasp her in its iron arms and there hold her unto death.

He dared not sleep, for the vision he beheld, with the anguished, pleading face of Roma Leigh was before him.

So he arose, dressed himself, and returning to the library, paced to and fro until just at dawn, utterly worn out he sunk into an easy-chair and became lost in deepest slumber.

There, several hours after, Black Pink found him.

She guessed that he was worrying about his son, over whose fate hung deepest mystery.

Breakfast was served and he ate heartily.

He seemed to have made up his mind to some decided course.

After the meal he ordered his horse, mounted and rode away.

He crossed the river at the ford, and reaching the Gypsy camp called to one of the band and said that he wished to see the Queen.

"The Queen will see no one," was the answer.

"Why not?"

"Such are her orders."

"Go and say that Raynor Rickerly, the master of Crag Eden, demands to see her."

"It will be useless."

"Go!" and the planter handed the man a piece of gold.

He went away and soon returned.

"The Queen will not see you."

"Go and ask her, then, if she will sell to me this plot of land that my own lands surround?"

"Our camp-ground?"

"Yes."

"She will not."

"Go and ask her and tell her I will pay her price for it, be it what it may."

The man departed, but came back with the word:

"Roma Leigh will sell at no price; she would not exchange it for your whole plantation."

The planter bit his lips, but said:

"How old is your Queen?"

"It is not for Gypsies to ask the age of our Queen."

"Is she not one who has seen two-score years?"

"Ask her."

"I will if she will see me."

"She will not see you."

"Is there not one of your people here whose name is Incah?"

"There is."

"I would see him."

"He will see no one."

"I must see him."

"Would you force yourself upon one who is wrong here?" and the Gypsy put his hand upon his head.

"Is he mad?"

"Yes."

"How long will you remain in camp here?"

"It is for our Queen to say."

The planter turned away, and retraced his road to Crag Eden.

Then he ascended to the tower, and, with spyglass in hand, sat hidden from view, with his eyes upon the Gypsy camp.

For a long time he sat thus, and then he suddenly raised his glass.

"No, no, it is not Roma Leigh," he muttered, in a disappointed way.

In the afternoon, as the shadows began to lengthen, he descended from the tower and ordered his horse.

He armed himself, and was soon riding away toward the ford.

Crossing the river, he turned into a path that led through a valley and not by the Gypsy camp.

A ride of a couple of miles brought him out near the cliff.

Dismounting, he hitched his horse and began the ascent of the ridge.

His face was white and set, his whole look that of a man who had made up his mind to some stern purpose.

He approached the arbor on the cliff unflinchingly.

At last he reached the spot, stepped into the arbor, and beheld the one he had come there to seek.

It was Roma Leigh. Not the beautiful, youthful girl he had seen the day before, just as she had been when he had first known her and won her love, but the Roma Leigh he had last seen in the agonies of death in a foreign land.

Every feature of her face, as there seen, was engraven on his heart.

Her dress, her jewels, her hair, and her expression as then, he could never drive from his memory.

Now she was before him, in look, in dress, in years and anguished expression as on that fearful day when she had taken her seat in the fatal chair.

It was Roma Leigh as she had been when she had, as he had believed, died by his hand in revenge for the sorrows she had brought upon him, the wrongs she had done him.

Who then had been the beautiful girl of the day before, who had stood upon that very spot?

Was it a fancy of his fevered brain, or was it some trick, to first show him the beauty he had cast aside, and then let him behold the one he had killed?

But there she was, Roma Leigh, the Gypsy

Queen, and she stood upon the very spot where, as a young girl, she had appeared the day before.

He gazed upon her like one spellbound.

He had nerved himself to face the worst, but now, when before her, his heart seemed to sink within him.

Certainly she was dead, he thought, when he had left her in that cottage in a foreign land.

How then could it be that she was now before him, seemingly her real self?

He was free from superstition; but he was now puzzled beyond all comprehension, for two Roma Leighs had appeared before him within twenty-four hours, both upon the same spot—one young and beautiful, the other still beautiful, but upon whom two-score years had fallen.

The woman stood with her eyes fixed upon the scene before her.

She did not appear to be aware of his presence.

With a great effort he mastered himself and stepped forward.

He would speak to her; be she flesh and blood, or be she spirit, he would speak to her.

But his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, after he had moved nearer to her.

She had turned at his step, and her eyes were fixed upon him.

She had not started at sight of him.

She had betrayed no emotion whatever; but her eyes seemed to pierce his very soul.

He tried hard to find utterance, yet could not, and about her seemed to hang an atmosphere that chilled him.

It was as though he was in a vault.

But Raynor Rickerly had nerved himself to face the worst.

He had come to that spot in the hope that he would meet the one who was now before him, and again he made an effort to speak, and his tongue found utterance.

But his voice seemed not his own as he said:

"Roma Leigh, I believed you dead; but we meet again."

"You have again dogged my steps, so your fate be upon your own head, murderess, devil that you are."

As he spoke he thrust his hand into his bosom and drew forth a pistol.

But the woman did not flinch, and the words that came from her lips were unnatural in sound.

"Raynor Rickerly, how dare you appear in the presence of the dead, the presence of the woman you put to death?"

"This spot is sacred to the spirit of Roma Leigh."

"Go! go ere the curse of the dead fall upon you!"

"Go!"

He tried to speak, he stretched forth his hands, but no utterance would pass his lips, and the blood surged into his brain until he reeled and fell his length upon the moss-grown rocks.

When he returned to consciousness Roma Leigh was not there, the sun had set, the shadows were deepening, and tottering down the ridge-path he mounted his horse and rode homeward muttering to himself over and over again:

"I am a haunted man!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE GYPSY QUEEN'S PROPHECY.

As Raynor Rickerly had not been over to Riverdale for several days, Colonel Burbank grew anxious about him, fearing that the suspense regarding his son's fate might have made him ill.

So he said one morning at breakfast:

"Violet, why not ride over to Crag Eden this morning and see how Mr. Rickerly is?"

"I was thinking of doing so, father, for I was anxious to know if he has any more news," replied Violet.

"No, for had he, he would have been over; but, by his not coming I fear that he is ill."

An hour after Violet was upon her way to Crag Eden, and upon reaching the mansion Darius told her that his master had been called away from home for several days, he thought by important letters received from Baltimore.

"He had heard nothing more of Lieutenant Rickerly?"

"Not a word, missy."

"Please tell him, as soon as he returns, to come over to Riverdale, as we are all most anxious to know what he has heard from Mexico."

"I'll tell him, missy; but did you know de Gypsies was here ag'in?"

"The Gypsies?"

"Yes, missy, de same as hav'n't been here for many a long year."

"Where are they, Darius?"

"You kin see 'em, missy, from the tower, if you wants to."

Violet sprung from her horse and ran into the mansion, Darius following at a gait more in keeping with his age.

Reaching the tower, the young girl saw the Gypsy camp and gazed at it with deepest interest.

The negroes had told her many strange le-

gends of the wandering people, and her parents had also spoken of the wondrous beauty of their queen, Roma Leigh.

That there had ever been a word between the master of Crag Eden and Roma Leigh, not a soul in the neighborhood had ever discovered.

The young planter had guarded his secret most thoroughly indeed as far as the Queen of the Wanderers was concerned.

"I have half a mind to go to the Gypsy camp and have my fortune told," murmured Violet, as she stood gazing down upon the picturesque scene.

"They do say that these strange people can read signs in the stars that govern the lives of mortals, and I may be able to know of the fate of poor Royal."

"I will go."

She spoke the last words aloud, and, having also caught her drift about the Gypsy camp, Darius said quickly and with deep earnestness:

"Don't do it, missy, don't do it."

"Don't go to the Gypsy camp, Darius?"

"Yes, missy."

"Why not?"

"You is goin' to find out about de future, missy, and de good Lord never meant for us to see into that, or he'd ha' made us all to read de stars and signs as Gypsy folks do."

"I wish to see their famous Queen, Darius."

"Yas, missy; and she were a beauty in de days gone by."

"I has seen her often afore you was born, and dere was some of us as thought she loved young massa."

"Royal?"

"No, missy; not Mars' Royal, for he were not born then, but Massa Raynor."

"He knew her, then?"

"He g t his fortune tole one day, and arter that de Queen ust ter often come along the roads to watch him go by, and it seemed that she loved him, for after he got married to Missy Agnes Ashly, of Viewlands, the Gypsies didn't come here only once or twice."

"But the Queen must be gettin' to be along in age now, for that were over twenty years ago, missy."

"Have you seen her this time?"

"No, missy, but I s'pects massa have, for he went over to de camp, and he have been so fretted ever since they come, for he didn't eat, and he didn't sleep, so I s'pose de Queen tole him suthin' he didn't want to hear."

"About Royal?" quickly asked Violet.

"I dunno, missy; but I was fearful it were so."

"I will go at once to the Gypsy camp."

And hastily descending the tower Violet Burbank mounted her horse and half an hour later rode up to the Gypsy camp.

A man with long, gray hair and a striking face, but with erect form and clad very gorgeously, walked toward her as she halted on the edge of the camp.

"What would the lady?" he asked, with a certain politeness that was marked.

"To see your Queen."

"You come, lady, from the Crag Eden home?"

"No, I merely went there to see how Planter Rickerly was, but he is away."

"Absent?" asked the man, quickly.

"Yes, he has gone to the city."

"And you would see our Queen?"

"Yes."

"You would have her read the future for you?"

"I would know certain things which it issaid her art can discover."

"I am Incah, lady, the Gypsy king, though our people are ruled by a woman, not a man."

"I will tell the Queen your wish and let you know if she will see you."

The man departed and disappeared among the tents, while Violet sat upon her horse, nervously awaiting his return.

It was some little time before he returned, and he said:

"Dismount, lady, for our Queen will see you."

Violet trembled violently, but accepted the politely offered aid of the Gypsy king and sprang to the ground.

A dark-faced lad ran forward to take her horse, and Incah led the way to the large tent, the quarters of the Queen.

"A lady without asks admission, Queen Roma Leigh," said Incah, as he reached the tent.

Instantly the curtain was raised and Roma Leigh bade Violet enter with the words:

"You are welcome, Miss Burbank, to the home of the Gypsy Queen."

"You know me?" asked Violet, with surprise, while in utter astonishment she gazed upon the one before her.

She had expected to behold a woman of forty years of age, at least.

Instead she beheld a young girl, certainly not out of her teens, and with a face of wondrous beauty.

Every feature was perfect, the eyes were marvels of loveliness, and the face, though bronzed by an outdoor life, had the flush of perfect health.

Her form was perfection, her every movement

graceful, and her costume rich enough for the favorite of the Sultan's harem.

The tent was a perfect scene of luxury, a divan serving as a sleeping-couch, and silken curtains hanging upon all sides, with velvet rugs upon the floor, and innumerable articles of *bric-a-brac* from many lands.

"You know me?" said Violet again, as she sunk into a most comfortable seat.

"Yes, I know you as Violet Burbank."

"Yet we never met before?"

"In my dreams only have I seen you before."

"You have dreamed of me, then?"

"Yes."

"Yet how did you know me?"

"You came before me in my dreams as one I would some day meet, and your name I read by the stars, as Violet Burbank."

Violet was puzzled, for the maiden looked to the soul of truth.

"You certainly know me," she said, and then added: "And you are Queen of the Gypsies?"

"I am Roma Leigh, the Queen of the Romana Gypsies."

"But you certainly cannot be the Roma Leigh about whom I have heard stories told, for she was here before I was born."

"I am Roma Leigh."

"Yet you seem scarcely as old as I am?"

The Gypsy smiled and said, as though anxious to change the subject from herself:

"You came to ask me about one you love?"

Violet started.

The maiden seemed to have read her very thoughts.

"I came to ask you, if in your power, to tell me all that I would know about the fate of one I care for as a friend."

"As a lover, for I can read in your eyes the difference between friendship and love."

"You refer to Royal Rickerly, the heir to Crag Eden?"

Again Violet started, and she began to feel impressed in the presence of the girl, as though before some supernatural being.

"Yes, I would know all that you can tell me of—of—him."

"Royal Rickerly?"

"Yes."

The Gypsy arose and stepped beneath what appeared to be an umbrella, which hung in one corner of the tent, and beneath which was an altar-like table, before which was a stool.

Upon the stool she knelt, her elbows resting upon the altar and her face in her hands.

Then from the umbrella fell a sable curtain all around her until she was hidden from sight.

A few moments of intense silence followed, and then slowly the sable curtains rose, drawn by some invisible hand, and the kneeling form was again revealed.

Violet did not speak, and ere long the Gypsy Queen raised her head, looked about her in a dazed kind of way, and, rising, approached her visitor.

"I will tell you what I saw of your life, and his, lady."

"I saw where your paths met in childhood, where years afterward he saved you from threatened danger, and love sprung up between you."

"He went far away to serve his country, he was taken by his foes and thrown in prison."

"He escaped, but to again become a prisoner."

"But he lives and you will meet again, and yet, for I must tell you the truth, shadows hover over your life and his, and even from your red lips bitter curses may some time come upon the day when Royal Rickerly won your love."

"I can say no more, Violet Rickerly, so ask no more."

The young girl was deeply impressed, more so than she cared to admit.

The Gypsy Queen did indeed seem able to read one's life; but had she read the future as she read the past?

Would there be shadows fall upon her, as Roma Leigh had said?

Who could tell?

With a dread in her heart Violet Burbank mounted her horse and rode slowly homeward.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE PLOTTER.

WHEN Raynor Rickerly left Crag Eden, he had gone, as Darius had said, to Baltimore.

But the business that called him there was of a nature that he did not care to have known.

He had been driven to the verge of desperation by the mystery overhanging Roma Leigh, whom he believed dead, slain by his hand, and who yet appeared to be alive.

It was a mystery, to be solved in but one way.

He must know who this Roma Leigh was in reality, who appeared as a ghost, as it were, then in the character of the Gypsy Queen as he had last seen her.

He had sought her life in the past, and he would do it again, for it must not be that she should live.

If he had failed before, he would not on this occasion.

He had felt remorse, and another act against life could not make it worse, especially if he got others to do the deed.

The Gypsy Queen, be she the Roma Leigh of old, or another, must be removed.

She knew his secret without doubt, if no others did, and must be silenced be she whom she might.

So to Baltimore went Raynor Rickerly, the master of Crag Eden.

He sought quarters at a fashionable hotel, but then sauntered out to a second-hand-clothing store and made some purchases.

A costumer's was next found, and when that night an old man, with gray hair and beard, a stooping posture and hobbling gait, left the rooms of the planter, no one would have suspected him of being the master of Crag Eden.

He wended his way to one of the lowest quarters of the town, down by the harbor, and entered a sailors' inn.

Here he held a conversation with the landlord, and the result was that he was shown to a private room.

Passing to and fro, in a nervous manner, he waited for full an hour before a knock came upon the door.

Instantly he assumed his stooping posture and said in a voice, disguised to that of quivering age:

"Come in."

Two men entered. A look at them was sufficient to reveal their character, or rather their lack of all character.

They were roughly dressed, their faces had the stamp of utter wickedness, and one seeking to employ rascals for evil work would never have passed them by.

They eyed the supposed old man with the look of men who suspected treachery.

Their guilty deeds had made them suspect that the one they came to see might be a detective, one who had deceived the landlord of the inn, that he might catch them in a trap.

"Did the landlord send you to me?" asked the disguised planter.

"Yas, ole feller," said one rudely, and they still kept their stand near the door.

"Well, sit down, for I need your aid and am willing to pay for it."

"What ter do?"

"Are you squeamish?"

"Thet depends."

"On what?"

"Ther lucre and ther job."

"You appear to be men who would not be particular."

"Waal, ther way ter find out what we'll do, is ter show yer hand."

"Suppose it was blood-letting?"

"Thet hain't onpossible ter do."

"A woman?"

"A life's a life, be it man, woman, or young 'un."

"Well, I want you for some work in which there is a life to take, and perhaps others in the taking of that one."

"Life comes high, old man," said the second visitor, speaking for the first time, and eying the planter as closely as he could in the dim light of the room, for the lamp had been so placed as to fall upon the two villains and not upon the plotter.

"I said I was willing to pay," said the planter, still speaking in the voice of one who was very old.

"What does you call pay?"

"How much do you want for taking a life?"

"A woman?"

"Yes."

"A clean thousand cash."

"You shall have it."

"Durn it, Kit, why didn't yer say more?" growled one of the men, and Kit came up smiling, as though to remedy his mistake with:

"Yer see, a man's life are wuth six hundred, and a kid's four hundred, for it kinder are a mercy ter take a young 'un out o' future misery in this world."

"Ef it's an old woman, ther price, as I said, were a thousand dollars fer each, for ther work hain't so easy ter git rid o' females, while ef it are a young girl, then ther job are wuth a clean five thousand."

"It is a young girl, and yet I hardly know just what she is."

And the planter became thoughtful, for he recalled Roma Leigh as he had known her in youth, and again with two-score years upon her head.

"Waal, out with it as ter who she be, and say how many more there is ter ring in, old man."

"There is the woman I speak of, and if you find her alone, no one else; but if there are others to protect her, you may have a fight on your hands."

"We'll find her when thar hain't no chance of a row."

"You must have more aid."

"We'll git another partner."

"Will three be enough?"

"Yas; fer any work we has ter do."

"Tain't safe ter trust too many, and when we gits ther work did we kin knife number three ef we wants ter and make the pay short division, for we two is partners ontill death."

"That is your own affair, not mine; but the one I wish you to remove is a Gypsy."

"A Gypsy?"

"Yes."

"It's dangerous work, fer ef they suspects who did it, they is worse than bloodhounds."

"You must look to that yourselves."

"Whar is she?"

"In the camp of her tribe in Virginia."

"Give us the locality, ther name o' ther Gyp, and when yer wish it done."

"The sooner the better, and here is a map of the locality of the camp, instructions how to reach it and the place where you will be most likely to find the woman alone."

"As to her name, it is Roma Leigh, the Gypsy Queen, and I will pay half down, and deposit with the landlord here the balance subject to your accomplishing your purpose."

"It's a go, and count on us, for we never fails," was the sardonic remark of one of the villains as he took the directions given him by the planter who was plotting to remove Roma Leigh from his path.

CHAPTER XXIII.

BRIBED TO KILL.

ROMA LEIGH, the Queen of the Romana Gypsies, be she the one who had won the heart of Raynor Rickerly in the long ago and whom the revengeful planter thought he had killed or not, was wont to visit daily the arbor on the cliff, where she had stood the day she had appeared like a ghost to the master of Crag Eden.

Whatever had brought the Romana Gypsies again to the vicinity of Crag Eden, they certainly appeared as though they had come to make a lengthy stay.

The wagons had been placed in regular position around the camp, the tents had been pitched in picturesque manner, a guard was kept walking about constantly, and the children had been given a place near by to play.

There were workers among the old men and women who made many odd and pretty little things for sale, the young men were busy as horse traders, fishermen and hunters, and the maidens seemed to spend most of their time in beautifying themselves and adding to their picturesque costumes.

Roma Leigh, the Queen, roamed about at her own sweet will.

Near hers was the tent of Ineah, the captain of the tribe, and he seemed to be the veriest slave of the Queen's will.

It was the wont of Roma Leigh to stroll alone in the forests.

At such times a huge dog attended her, a savage-looking brute, that was guard enough one would think for his mistress.

She otherwise went alone, and her steps were almost invariably turned in the direction of the arbor-cliff.

What her pleasure was, not one of her people asked; if she was content to while away the hours there, alone and in her own way, it was her own sweet will and concerned them not.

One afternoon Roma Leigh left camp alone, excepting that her dog trotted at her heels.

She carried a portfolio with her and wended her steps toward the arbor-cliff.

She followed the path up the ridge until she reached the arbor, and there sat down upon the rustic seat that time was crumbling away.

Her dog lay down near for awhile, and then, as though assured that his mistress had come to remain for some time, went off in search of a rabbit with which to tempt his appetite.

One looking upon the Queen could never believe her other than a young girl.

She certainly had not the appearance of one over twenty years of age at furthest.

She looked very beautiful as she sat there, though there was an expression upon her face of firm resolve strangely pronounced in one of her seeming years.

Opening the portfolio she took out a half-finished sketch.

It was a scene from the cliff, of the valley, the distant river and the overhanging hills, and the work showed no rude hand with the pencil.

Arranging her portfolio so as to serve as an easel, the Gypsy Queen set to work upon her sketch, and remained patiently at her task, which seemed one of evident pleasure to her.

So engrossed was she that she failed to see a horse pass along the path at the base of the cliff, bearing a rider upon his back.

The rider halted, gazed up at the cliff, and said:

"How often have I wished to make my way up there, and I will do so now."

Suiting the action to the word, the rider rode along the bottom of the ridge toward the path that led up to the arbor.

Nor did the Gypsy Queen observe that there were others nearer to her than the one on horse-back.

These others were three men.

Two of them were the precious pair of villains seen in the inn in Baltimore.

The other was just of a kind with them, for his face was stamped with a scoundrelism that no amount of repentance could ever obliterate.

They crept out of the thicket like jackals, and

noiselessly moved to a position from whence they could see the Gypsy Queen.

"We has her," whispered one.

"Yes, and we kin tumble her over ther cliff, and it will be thought she fell over," said another.

"Ther very thing; but we must make sure," the third remarked.

"She's sittin' within four feet o' the edge."

"Yes, and we kin just creep up, grab her quick and over she goes."

"But about them precious gems we has seen her wearin'?"

"We might go 'round to whar she tumbles and take a few; but it won't do to take 'em all, for the thing wouldn't be thought a accident, yer see, and we needs ter look out fer our lives as well as our pockets."

This advice seemed to be good, and the trio of assassins again moved slowly toward the unsuspecting Gypsy Queen.

She continued her sketching, while they advanced with deadly intent.

And up the path came the rider, who had dismounted to ascend on foot.

Neither of the three, the Gypsy, the assassins, or the third party knew of the existence of the other, excepting the murderous three, who had their eyes upon their victim.

Up the hill path came the rider, slowly and as though in no hurry.

Suddenly a wild cry rung out, muttered curses and the sound of a death-struggle.

The rider bounded forward and came in view of a thrilling scene.

Two men were on the cliff, struggling, striving to hurl a woman over to her death.

But she, with the tenacity of death clung to them so that they could not release her hold.

One cry of alarm had she uttered when seized, but, quick as a flash she had realized the deadly intent of the assassins and clung to them, fighting with the energy of despair.

In vain did they strive to break her hold, and at last one of them said to the third man, who so far stood by, unable to aid:

"Break her arms, for it will be thought it were done by the fall."

"We dares not knife her, mates."

"Unhand her!"

The words were uttered in a fearless, clarion voice; but they were spoken not by a man, but by a woman.

It was the rider who had suddenly come upon the scene and rushed to the rescue of the Gypsy Queen, so near her death.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN UNLOOKED-FOR TERMINATION.

THE one who so boldly rushed to the rescue of the Gypsy Queen was a young girl.

It was, in fact, Violet Burbank.

She had been, as was often her wont, extending her afternoon ride alone, and had taken the path that led around the base of the cliff.

Few ever went that way, for it led through the wildlands of Crag Eden Plantation.

The negroes shunned the spot, for it was said by those who handed down weird legends, that a murder had been committed once, by a man who got rid of an heir that stood in his way by throwing him over the rocks one day when they were out hunting together.

The Indians had a legend too, that two chiefs of a tribe that once inhabited that part of Virginia, had fought a duel for the possession of a beautiful white captive.

She had watched the duel, and when the victor came to claim her, had sprung from the cliff to her death.

There were the marks of two graves at the base of the cliff, which gave credence to these stories, and so the negroes said that the cliff was haunted by the spirits of the murdered heir and the captive maiden.

Violet Burbank had heard these stories, and she had never gratified her curiosity by going to the top of the cliff.

Upon the afternoon that she did so she was governed by a strange impulse that urged it.

She had not expected to find a soul there, and by day, certainly not even the specters of the dead who had there lost their lives.

What was her amazement then, to hear a wild scream.

Sue started, the captive suicide at once coming to her mind, for she knew that the cry was in the voice of a woman.

She however saw three men, and beheld their struggle with a woman.

Violet was utterly fearless, and without considering odds against her rushed to the rescue of one of her own sex.

She had a small pistol, a present from her father, who told her to never ride out alone without it, and she had, upon leaving her horse, turned back and taken it from the saddle-pocket where she carried it.

With this in hand she ran forward and dashed upon the scene.

The three men started with alarm, and two of them turned toward her, the other still retaining his hold upon Roma Leigh.

Could Violet have fired then, she might have done good execution; but she retained her presence of mind, and seeing that she might miss

her man and kill the Gypsy, she wisely lowered the weapon.

But she kept up a bold front and called out:

"Release that woman, or I will kill you."

The trio of scamps were taken aback.

Roma Leigh had not been hurled over the cliff, as they had hoped.

Then, too, they had a second maiden upon their hands, and one too that was armed.

Could it be that she was not alone, that other help was near?

This thought flashed through the minds of the three.

They did not wish to fire, for that might attract attention to their presence.

But they must get rid of both now, to save themselves.

"Rush on her, Kit, and we'll toss 'em both over."

"It's got ter be did," cried the leader of the trio.

"She's armed, though."

"Durn it, risk ther gal's shootin', fer it's a rope-end mighty quick, ef yer don't and we is tuk."

With this the speaker tried again to hurl Roma Leigh over the cliff, while his comrades made a rush together upon Violet, hoping thus to destroy her aim.

But she sprung to one side, still with presence of mind enough to get the Gypsy out of the line of her shot, and then she drew trigger.

"Cuss her! she's hit me!" cried one of the men, as he turned half round and his left arm dropped broken to his side.

But the next instant his comrade had reached the brave girl, who still stood her ground, her pistol clubbed as a weapon.

At the same time he grasped her in his powerful arms, and thrust one hand over her mouth to smother the cry that burst from her lips.

The wounded man also now reached her, and she was dragged rudely toward the cliff, where their comrade was struggling desperately with Roma Leigh, who fought for her life most savagely.

But they were three strong, brutal men against two women, and such a fight could not last long, and the end was near at hand.

Another moment and Roma Leigh and Violet Burbank would have been hurled to death, when suddenly, with a sharp yelp, Nip, the huge dog of the Gypsy Queen, rushed upon the scene and sprung at the throat of the nearest ruffian.

It was the man whom Violet had wounded, and who had gone to help his leader, as best he could, to hurl the Gypsy Queen to her death.

He released his hold, staggered backward, and dog and man went together over the cliff, their heavy thud as they fell reaching the ears of those who were struggling so desperately above.

Still it was two powerful men to two of the weaker sex, and the end must come but one way, if no help came.

But help did come, and from an unexpected source, and in a most remarkable manner.

It came in the shape of a pistol-shot, and the aim had been deadly, for the bullet found the brain of the desperate villain who was struggling with Violet Burbank.

Together they sunk to the rocks, the man dead, the young girl unconscious, for, with help at hand, she had lost her splendid nerve which had so well upheld her.

As, though knowing how deadly his aim had been, the rescuer did not pause to notice the result of his shot, but sprung forward and grasped the man who held the Gypsy Queen upon the very verge of the cliff.

He dared not attempt a shot there, so close was the fellow to his intended victim.

But the rescuer tore away his arms, and instantly a fierce struggle began between the two men, the assassin striving to hurl the Gypsy Queen by a last effort over the cliff.

And, but for a quick grasp of her clothing by the rescuer, he would have done so, and Roma Leigh was thrown backward with a force that caused her to fall heavily upon the rocky shelf near the arbor.

Then it was that the struggle was begun between man and man.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE RESCUER.

THE Gypsy Queen arose from her fall considerably shaken up by it.

She knew, however, that, but with the force she had been hurled by the rescuer, she would have been sent reeling over the cliff by the last effort of the man in whose powerful grasp she had been held.

She was panting like a hard-run deer from her effort to save her life, and her head was dizzy as she arose to her feet.

But she must go to the aid of the one who had so daringly come to hers.

But, as she advanced, fairly staggering with the effect of her struggle, she saw her rescuer arise from the ground and the assassin remain.

"Have you killed him, sir?" she asked.

The rescuer turned, gazed with intense admiration into the beautiful face of the Gypsy Queen, and said:

"No; I merely stunned him with my blows.

"I reserved him for hanging, which should be his fate.

"I will tie him here to this arbor."

Roma Leigh drew from her waist a silken sash that served the very purpose, and then, while the rescuer securely bound the prisoner's hands and feet and then fastened him to the arbor, she ran to the side of Violet Burbank, who still lay unconscious upon the rocks by the dead body of the dead desperado.

By the time that he was securely bound, the ruffian recovered from the stunning blows given him by the new-comer upon the scene, and scowled upon his victor with a look of fury.

"What hes yer tied me fer, young feller?" he growled.

The one he addressed laughed and answered in an off-hand way:

"For keeps."

"It are a shame, for I were perfectin' ther gals from them other fellers."

Again the victor laughed, for he seemed to enjoy the position taken in the affair by the ruffian.

But he said:

"Well, I have a different opinion, my fine rascal, and you'll find a jury will agree with me and hang you."

The man turned livid at this, and said:

"It's big money in your pocket ter let me go. Go off with ther gals, young feller, but first fix me so I kin git, and I'll give yer a clean thousand."

"I am not in need of money, and if I was I'd not let you go, so hold your tongue."

With this the speaker went toward where Roma Leigh knelt over the form of Violet Burbank.

But the Gypsy Queen had chafed the hands and face of Violet, and brought her to consciousness, for she arose as their rescuer approached and, as her eyes fell upon him sprung forward with a glad cry, while there came in joyous tones the words:

"Royal! Royal! it is you!"

She would have fallen again had he not caught her in his arms, and then for a moment neither spoke.

Growing calm at length Violet said:

"Royal, thank God you have come back, and it is to you that I owe my life, for those men intended to hurl me over the cliff," and she shuddered at the recollection.

"And to you, sir, Roma Leigh, the Gypsy Queen, owes her life," and the woman laid her small hand upon his arm.

"I am the one to be thankful for having been near to aid you both."

"Roma Leigh can never forget it," said the Gypsy impressively.

"Nor can I, Royal; but how came you here?"

"I was on my way home, took the path from the highway in the valley, that brought me along by the cliff, and nearly got a man and dog on top of my head.

"I heard the struggle going on above, rode up the path with all speed, as far as I could, and thus came upon a scene that certainly startled me.

"Pray tell me what it all means?"

"I can only tell you that I was riding, came along the cliff path, and determined to visit this spot, about which there are weird legends.

"I came to the top to find this girl, who is Roma Leigh, the Gypsy Queen, struggling for her life, and came to her rescue.

"I fired, and am sure I hit one of the men, for his arm dropped to his side.

"It was the one that the dog sprung upon and bore over the cliff.

"Then two of them turned upon me, and but for you, Royal, I would now be dead."

"As I would also, sir; but I can only tell you that this is a favorite retreat of mine, for the camp of my people is not very far away, and I was sketching the scene from the cliff, when three men rushed upon me.

"Their words told me that they had come here to kill me, and they sought to throw me over the cliff.

"This brave and beautiful lady saved me then, and your coming rescued us both.

"Did I not tell you, Violet Burbank, that you would see your lover again?" and Roma Leigh turned to Violet, who turned crimson at her bluntly-spoken words.

A strange look crossed the face of Royal Rickerly also at the words of the Gypsy Queen, and he said, somewhat hastily:

"Let us go from here, for see the shadows of night will soon fall.

"I will see you home, if you will permit it, Miss Burbank."

"Miss Burbank," muttered Violet, and then she thought that the presence of Roma Leigh had caused him to be distant, and said:

"With pleasure, Mr. Rickerly—I mean Lieutenant Rickerly, and a warm welcome you will find from my parents; but your father, I believe, is absent in Baltimore."

"I am travel-stained, as you see, and my baggage I sent on by stage, while I came on horse-

back, from a town some miles away, having purchased a horse I took a fancy to.

"I am glad that I did so, for it brought me by this cliff in the very nick of time."

Violet and Roma Leigh also congratulated themselves upon the happy circumstance of Royal Rickerly's coming by that way on horseback, and the former gazed upon the young sailor with an expression of admiration she could not conceal.

He had grown since she had seen him last, for his splendid form had developed grandly.

His face was bronzed to the hue of Roma Leigh's by long exposure to a Mexican sun, and his features were stamped with resolution, dignity and sternness beyond his years.

He wore a riding suit which was indeed travel-stained, for by boat, stage and horse he had come a long journey from Mexico.

"How much you will have to tell us all, Royal, of your adventures; but come, let us leave this dead spot," and Violet glanced nervously at the dead body of the man who had meant to murder her.

"Yes, this is no place for ladies," said, with a smile, Royal Rickerly, while he added:

"I will send for that prisoner."

"My people will come after him, sir, and also bury the dead," Roma Leigh remarked quickly, but with a certain significance of tone which, though it did not then strike Royal Rickerly and Violet, they afterward recalled.

Stepping up to the prisoner, Royal Rickerly saw that he was securely bound, and then the trio started down the ridge path to the glen.

The horse of the sailor was found, and then they came to where Violet had left the animal she had ridden.

But she refused to mount until they reached a path where Roma Leigh turned off to go to the camp of her people.

Here they parted with the Gypsy Queen, and raising Violet to her saddle, Royal Rickerly sprung upon his own horse and they dashed off toward Riverdale just as twilight fell upon the earth.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE RETURN.

THERE was a great joy in the heart of Violet Burbank, as she rode up to Riverdale Mansion in the gathering gloom, and beheld her father come forth to meet her, evidently anxious about her long stay, for she brought with her an escort whom the colonel would be most glad to bid welcome home.

"Ah, Vi, I was getting very anxious at your late stay; but I see that you have an escort," said the colonel, taking the young sailor for one of the planters near, as in the darkness he did not recognize him.

"Father, do you not see who it is that comes with me?" cried Violet.

One glance at the splendid-looking man before him, and Colonel Burbank grasped the hand of the sailor, while he cried:

"Rickerly! can I believe my eyes?"

"But how changed in the time that has passed since you left, for you are no longer the youth who left us three years ago."

"And how happy we are to see you, Royal, my boy!"

Travel-stained and weary as he was, Royal Rickerly was ushered into the mansion to remain to tea, while a servant was dispatched to Crag Eden to give notice to the servants there, for the planter was still absent, and the heir to the grand old home had returned and would arrive in a couple of hours, for he had decided to go home that night.

After as warm a welcome from Mrs. Burbank as he had received from the colonel, Royal Rickerly told in a modest way of his meeting with Violet in the very nick of time at the cliff.

"I was riding slowly along the path at the base of the cliff," he said, "when I heard a strange sound, like the flight of a covey of vultures, and my horse shied violently.

"Looking up, I beheld two forms flying downward.

"They struck with fearful force, as I looked, and I saw that they were a man and a dog, the latter clinging to the former to the last.

"Of course they were both killed by the fall, and hearing a struggle going on above on the cliff, I rode with all haste up the ridge, and was happy in being in time to serve Miss Burbank and the Gypsy Queen, whom it seems the men had attacked, to either kill for her jewels, or to kidnap for a ransom, and your daughter had boldly gone to her rescue."

Just then Violet entered the room, having changed her riding-habit for an evening dress in which she looked most lovely.

She heard the last words of the young sailor, and quickly told her story, of how she had conquered her superstitious dread of the cliff, to go and see the view from there, and had seen Roma Leigh in the clutches of the three wicked men, and, without thought of her own danger, had gone to the rescue of the Gypsy Queen.

The desperate situation that followed she told in a thrilling manner, as also how her heart had given a bound of joy when a dark form had dashed to her rescue.

Then she had swooned away, and upon re-

turning to consciousness had found Roma Leigh bending over her, while in their preserver she recognized Royal Rickerly, her lover.

The colonel and his wife listened with deep emotion to the story of their daughter, and they seemed to fully understand that but for the timely coming of the young sailor, Violet would have died a fearful death.

Tea was then announced, and after they had returned to the library Colonel Burbank said:

"Now, Lieutenant Rickerly, we wish to congratulate you upon your success as a sailor, and also upon your double escape from captivity.

"We have watched your gallant career with the deepest interest, and must learn now from your lips of your adventures since the mysterious disappearance of the vessel that you served upon."

"Yes, tell us of your escape, sir," said Mrs. Burbank, while Violet urged:

"Pray, do; and let me say that not once did I ever give up hope that you would return; but how changed you are in the time that has passed.

"You look as I had pictured you, and yet it seems that I will have to get acquainted with you over again."

And Violet laughed as though amused at the thought.

"Yes, you have changed, Rickerly; your face is almost stern now, and you look like one who had seen much of life and passed through strange scenes; but to your story."

And the colonel gazed upon the face of the sailor as though he sought hard to read it to his own satisfaction.

"Of the vessel I can tell you nothing, sir, I may say, for I left her to go ashore with a party to fill our water-casks.

"We were betrayed by our Mexican pilot, attacked from an ambush, and I verily believe I am the only living man of the party.

"I was captured by a Mexican marauder chief, half-bandit, half-pirate, and he meant to serve me well, but was arrested for having treated me well, was suspected as a traitor, and we were both seized and carried to a prison, where we were kept for a long time.

"Of the poor fellow I can tell you nothing, for we were separated there, and my cruel treatment began.

"I was thrown into a dungeon, poorly fed, and I believe was to be starved, in fact; but an earthquake one night split the wall of my dungeon, so that, with hard work, I was enabled to get out before dawn.

"I speak Spanish well, as I believe you know, and in the confusion and excitement caused by the earthquake managed to get clothing with which to hide the uniform I wore.

"I made my escape thus, and seeing a chance to rescue other prisoners, as an American vessel-of-war was on the coast, I laid a plot to do so, which, however, turned out disastrously, for the party were attacked, the prisoners had escaped without our aid, and I again found myself in a Mexican dungeon.

"Fortunately I again found means to escape, gained the coast, put to sea in an open boat and was picked up by a vessel bound to New Orleans.

"From there I made my way homeward with all speed, determined to ask leave to remain at home for a few months, in case, as I believe, the war is about over, to resign my commission in the navy and settle down at Crag Eden."

"I am really glad to hear you say this, Rickerly, for the war is about at an end, and I think you have had your share of danger and suffering," Colonel Burbank remarked.

"Yes, and I coincide with my husband, Lieutenant Rickerly, for you indeed have had an eventful life in the short while you have lived," said Mrs. Burbank.

"And what does Miss Burbank say?" asked Royal Rickerly with a smile, and he seemed to await the answer with the deepest interest.

"I think with papa and mamma, that you had better remain at home, for you have won all the honor and glory you can get now, as the war must end soon.

"Yes, I say remain at home," and Violet blushed at the request she made of her lover, who responded gallantly:

"My fate is in your hands, Miss Burbank," and rising he bade all farewell, and mounting his horse rode slowly toward Crag Eden.

He was received by Darius, Black Pink, and the other servants upon his arrival, with every manifestation of delight, and over and over again he had to listen to their praises of his improved appearance.

In spite of knowing that he had taken tea at Riverdale, Darius had prepared for his master a most tempting supper, and while the young sailor with real relish enjoyed the edibles, the faithful old negro heard of his adventures in Mexico, and that night, before he retired to rest, retailed the whole story to his fellow-servants, who regarded their young master as a most superior being.

It was late when Royal Rickerly retired to his room for the night, and even then he did not seek rest until nearly dawn.

He seemed anxious to look over his room, ex-

amine the little souvenirs there, and read over old letters and papers.

But at last he went to bed and slept soundly until quite late.

Then Darius entered the room with the news that the master had returned home and would join him at breakfast very soon.

A few moments more and Royal Rickerly met his father in the library.

"And you are my noble son?"

"Why, Royal, how greatly the years have changed you," and Royal Rickerly was deeply moved.

"And you, father, are changed, for gray hairs are upon your temples, and a few crow's-feet in the corners of your eyes.

"Yet, now as I recall you in the past, time has dealt kindly with you indeed."

They adjourned to the breakfast-room, and there for a long time talked over the past and the present.

As they walked upon the piazza to enjoy their cigars, some horsemen were seen riding up the roadway to the mansion.

"What can they want here?" said Royal Rickerly, and his face grew a trifle anxious.

"I guess I can tell you, sir, for I really have regretted to make known how lucky was my return last evening, merely stating that I had taken tea at Riverdale.

"But these men doubtless are a constable and his posse on the search for information regarding my killing a man yesterday afternoon, and making another a prisoner, while a third was also slain, in an attack they made upon the Gypsy Queen and Miss Burbank."

"Good God! an attack upon the Gypsy Queen and Miss Burbank?"

"And you killed the men!"

"One is a prisoner, you say, a prisoner?"

The words fell in almost terrified accents from the lips of Raynor Rickerly, and he fairly tottered to a chair on the piazza and sunk into it, his face livid as though some fearful dread had seized upon him.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE MYSTERIOUS MURDER.

It was certainly a surprise to the master of Crag Eden to see several horsemen approaching his home, for he discouraged all visitors, except from Riverdale.

But Royal Rickerly did not understand why he should be so moved by the fact that they were coming to see about the affair on the arbor cliff of the day before.

He looked at his father in amazement, for the master of Crag Eden seemed for a moment unmannered.

But rallying quickly, he said:

"Why, how foolish I am, my son, to show emotion, when really I knew that no harm befell Violet, or you would have at once told me, and as for the Gypsy Queen her death is a good riddance, as I suspect those people of being little else than wandering marauders."

"No harm did befall Miss Burbank, sir, nor the Gypsy Queen either, for I was so fortunate as to rescue both."

"The Gypsy Queen is not dead, then?" excitedly said Mr. Rickerly.

"Not unless she has died since yesterday, sir."

"And you saved her?"

"Yes, father, I was so fortunate."

"So fortunate? Why, you were—but never mind, for here come those horsemen and we must see what they wish," and Mr. Rickerly turned away, more to hide the emotion his face revealed than to glance at the horsemen who were now riding into the yard about Crag Eden.

They were three in number and halted for a moment to speak with the negro who opened the gate for them.

Then they came on, dismounted and ascended to the piazza.

Mr. Raynor recognized one as an officer of the law, whom he had long known slightly, and the others he did not remember to have seen.

"Good-morning, Constable Creighton; to what circumstance am I indebted for this visit from you?" coldly said Raynor Rickerly.

"It is a visit of business, sir, and one in which your son is interested."

"I am glad to see you home, Mr. Rickerly, in safety," and the constable turned to the young man, while he added:

"You have changed much, sir, since we last met some years ago; but a youth soon runs up into settled manhood."

Royal shook hands with the officer, and made some reply, while Constable Creighton said:

"My visit, lieutenant, is to get from you a full statement of the affair at the cliff last night, for a gentleman came upon the Gypsies burying three dead men, and reported it to me, and they referred me to you."

"The story is soon told, sir."

"I was on my way home, and coming on horseback cut through the timber-land, which brought me by the cliff, and there came upon a scene which I beg to relate as I recall it."

Then Royal Rickerly went on to tell the whole affair, and one of the men with the con-

stable took his words down as they were uttered, for the party had now adjourned to the library, at the invitation of Mr. Rickerly.

"You say that Miss Burbank fired upon one of the men?"

"Yes, sir, and broke his arm, she thinks, as it fell to his side."

"This man was attacked by the huge dog belonging to the Gypsy Queen, and they went over the cliff together?"

"Yes, sir, and their fall attracted me to the scene on the cliff."

"You shot the man who held Miss Burbank?"

"I did."

"Do you know where your bullet struck him?"

"Of course, in the head."

"Killing him instantly?"

"Certainly."

"And then?"

"As I said, I sprang upon the man who was dragging the Gypsy Queen to the edge of the cliff, and after a short struggle mastered him."

"You did not kill him?"

"I did not, sir."

"You are sure?"

"Perfectly."

"Might not you have knifed him, or shot him, and in the excitement not known it?"

Royal Rickerly laughed.

"Why, my dear sir, I was not excited, but as cool as I now am."

"I have been in too many scenes of death to lose my nerve when all was going my way."

"I stunned the scamp by a few blows, and the Gypsy Queen said that she would send her men to guard him, so I left him."

"Yet he is dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, if there are no injuries upon him, he died of fright, that is all."

"There are injuries upon him, a knife thrust in the heart."

"Ah!"

"Yes, sir."

"Where is he?"

"At the grave, and I would ask you to ride there with me."

"Certainly."

Raynor Rickerly also said that he would go, and soon the party set off for the scene of the tragedy.

They found there a large number of planters, and a dozen Gypsy men, the latter under guard.

By the side of the open graves lay the bodies of the slain men, the same who had attacked the Gypsy Queen.

As Royal Rickerly was recognized a shout of welcome greeted him, for all had read of his exploits in Mexico, and he had been given up as dead.

After saluting those who pressed forward to greet him, he turned to Colonel Burbank, who was also present, and said:

"There seems to be some mystery, sir, about the death of this third man?"

"Yes, but it is clear in my mind as to how he died."

"The constable got the story of the affair from Violet, and then went to see you, and that should be satisfactory."

"But the Gypsies were found burying the three bodies, and they reported that you had killed them all, so the truth was wanted to clear them."

"Have you told your story?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you heard the story of the Gypsy Queen, Constable Creighton?" and Colonel Burbank turned to the officer.

"I have, sir."

"What is it?"

"It tallies in everything with what has been told by Miss Burbank and Lieutenant Rickerly, except that she does not know whether the third man was mortally wounded or not."

"He was not; but what do the Gypsies who found him say?" asked Royal Rickerly.

"You shall hear, for they all tell the same story."

"Come here," and he called to the captain, Incah, who advanced with an air of utter indifference.

"You found those bodies?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"One there beneath the cliff, one lying upon the cliff, a bullet in his brain, and the third tied to the arbor, and dead, for a knife-thrust was in his heart."

"Who sent you here?"

"Our Queen, Roma Leigh."

"For what purpose?"

"To bury the dead."

"Said she nothing else?"

"No."

Here the whole party were in a quandary. The three assassins had certainly deserved their fate; but Royal Rickerly and Violet Burbank said that but two had been slain.

The three had been found dead, however.

Who had killed the third man, was the question.

"I think it is plain enough," said Raynor Rickerly, speaking for the first time.

"What is plain enough, Rickerly?" asked Colonel Burbank.

"How that third man came by his death."

"How do you account for it?"

"Why the Gypsies killed him of course," was the cool reply, and those he accused turned their eyes quickly upon him.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A WEB OF MYSTERY.

"Do you accuse the Gypsies of having murdered this man?" asked Constable Creighton of Raynor Rickerly.

"I certainly do, for why should they not have done so?"

"They deny that it is so."

"That may be."

"You do not believe their denial?"

All now gathered around the constable and Raynor Rickerly, the latter standing the glances turned upon him with the utmost composure.

"I do not believe them, for they murdered the man."

"Yet they found him bound, so could have nothing to fear."

"That may be, but it lies between three parties."

"Who are the three?"

"My son admits his work, and I think you will all agree that it was well done."

"If he killed the man it was after he left the spot with Miss Burbank and the Gypsy Queen, and yet he escorted Miss Burbank home, so could not have come back."

"If he secretly knifed the man, what motive had he for doing so?"

"They, Miss Burbank and my son, left the Gypsy Queen where the path turned off to her camp."

"Might she not have come back, and in her anger at having been attacked, driven her knife into the heart of the bound man?"

A yell of anger came from the Gypsies at this imputation against their Queen, and all present gazed eagerly upon the master of Crag Eden.

But he was wholly unmoved, and continued:

"I do not say that Roma Leigh did so, but suggest that she might have done so."

"These men were sent by her, by their own confession, to bury the bodies of the three intended assassins of their Queen."

"They found the three men dead, they say, and one of them bound to the arbor and with a knife thrust in his heart."

"They were burying three bodies when Mr. Shields saw them, and if Lieutenant Rickerly did not kill the third man, if the Gypsy Queen did not drive the knife to his heart, then this Captain Incah and his ten companions are guilty, and they did the deed to avenge Roma Leigh."

"But I believe their story, that they found three dead bodies here, and incline to the belief that the Gypsy Queen returned and drove her knife into the heart of the third man, so I would suggest that she be brought here and the weapons she carries be examined."

The Gypsies were indignant, but the planters present all seemed to feel that the master of Crag Eden was right, and so Constable Creighton and a posse were sent to the Gypsy camp for Roma Leigh.

No matter how much the three men deserved death, the third man had certainly been murdered while bound, and this was a deed of crime that could not be overlooked most certainly.

Constable Creighton rode away with a foreboding he did not make known.

The Gypsies would fight to the death for their Queen, he well knew.

So he decided to use strategy, and go to ask her to again tell her story of the affair at the cliff, and as though not understanding all, to request her to accompany him thither.

This plan worked well, and the Gypsy Queen returned with the posse.

Her great beauty was gazed upon, by all, and Raynor Rickerly stood apart regarding her with a strange look in his eyes.

She repeated her story, told it word for word as before, and seeming to suspect no trickery, had not even glanced toward Incah and his comrades.

Again she said that she had left the scene with Royal Rickerly and Miss Burbank, and that the third man had been alive.

She stated that she had at once sent the men to the scene, telling them to bury the dead found there and guard the prisoner.

"You know that the third man was found dead, Queen Roma Leigh?" asked the constable.

A peculiar look crossed the face of Roma Leigh, while she said:

"Was he?"

"He was, and more, he was stabbed to the heart while bound, and this was murder."

"Indeed?" and she arched her handsome brows.

"You wear a knife?"

"Yes."

"Permit me to see it."

She handed it to the constable, coolly drawing it from the sheath in her sash.

It was a long, narrow blade, of foreign make, and the hilt was set with jewels.

The blade was slightly tarnished, as though lately used.

The constable handed the stiletto to Dr. Lovering, who was present, and said:

"Please see if the wound was made with this weapon, doctor."

The physician walked to the body, and after a short stay there returned with the remark:

"It was made with this stiletto, or one exactly like it."

A murmur ran through the crowd, and then a deep hush came upon all as Constable Creighton said, impressively:

"Roma Leigh, I feel sorry for you, as your provocation was great; but I must arrest you as the murderer of that man!"

The Gypsy Queen did not flinch.

She cast a hasty glance at Raynor Rickerly, and a smile crossed her lips.

Then she looked toward her people, as though to measure their strength in an attempt to rescue her from those who would hold her.

She saw that she was at a disadvantage, and knew that the charge of murder was a serious one.

Whether she was guilty or not guilty her face did not reveal.

She was calmness personified, and after a moment of intense, painful silence, said:

"You accuse me of murder."

"You say I killed a man while he was at my mercy, and hold me as a murderess?"

"We accuse you more upon the testimony of your own people, Roma Leigh, for they say that they were sent here to bury three bodies, and nothing was said by you to them about a prisoner," the constable remarked.

She started at this and again glanced at her people.

They were silent, pale and anxious, all except Incah.

"What would you do with me?" she asked.

"Arrest you, place you in prison, there to await trial for murder."

"If innocent you must prove it."

"And my people?"

"With three men only, as witnesses, we have to deal, and they must go to prison, too."

"Is this the justice of your people?"

"It is law," was the evasive response of the constable.

"And this for a man who came here to murder me and is found dead?"

"What proof have you that he came here to murder you?"

"The testimony of my daughter goes to prove that fact, Constable Creighton," said Colonel Burbank.

"And I have said what I saw, sir," added Royal Rickerly, and as the constable made no reply, he continued:

"I do not think it right to hold this young woman as guilty of murder, for my belief is that some of her men are guilty of knifing the scamp, little dreaming that it would fall upon their Queen, and I do not blame them if they did kill him."

"That is hardly a safe stand to take, Lieutenant Rickerly," said the constable, with a smile.

"I was thinking of justice, rather than law; but were these men searched and nothing found upon them to show their motive for the crime they came here to commit?"

"Can you not give a reason?" and Royal Rickerly turned to Roma Leigh.

"Nothing was found about the men, other than their weapons," said the constable.

"Ask the Gypsies," suggested Royal Rickerly.

But the Gypsies said that they had found nothing whatever, and it was upon the lips of Royal Rickerly to demand that the Gypsies who had come to bury the bodies he searched, when his father stepped quickly to his side and whispered:

"I know what you would demand, but for God's sake do not do it."

Royal knew no reason for the request, but he acquiesced in it by remaining silent.

CHAPTER XXIX.

SELF-ACCUSED.

It was very apparent that a web of mystery was already woven about the tragedy on the cliff.

That the three dead men had come there to kill Roma Leigh all seemed to agree upon.

But what was their motive?

Perhaps it was to rob her, and yet how much more they could have obtained by kidnapping the Queen of the Gypsies, for then a large ransom would have been paid to get her back to her people.

This seemed to indicate that the object had not been one of robbery.

It pointed, from the facts, to intended murder.

Yet the Queen and those of her people about her, avowed that they had never seen the three men before, and more, they knew of no motive for their cruel intention.

As one of the men certainly had been murdered, it was the duty of the coroner to get at the reason why, and who had been his slayer.

All the testimony seemed to point toward Roma Leigh's having returned, in her anger after having parted with Lieutenant Rickerly and Violet Burbank, and driven her knife into the heart of the bound man.

She did not look like one to do a deed so cruel, and yet she was a Gypsy, and what she would do those who gazed upon her could only guess.

"Well, what is to be done, constable, for I stand ready to go bail for this accused girl?" said Royal Rickerly.

The Gypsy Queen bent upon him a look that was full of strange meaning, and her dark face flushed; but she uttered no word.

"I await the coroner's decision, sir, for he has heard all that there is to tell and his jury can soon render a verdict," the constable answered.

The coroner thus admonished turned to the jury he had called together to sit upon the case.

They deliberated a few minutes and then, with the usual display of wisdom on such occasions came to the conclusion that one of the men, unknown to the jury, had been killed by falling from the cliff with a dog which had attacked him.

A second man, alike unknown, had died from a shot, fired by Lieutenant Royal Rickerly, who, under the existing circumstances did only what was right.

The third man, also unknown, had come to his death, while bound and a prisoner, unable to resist, by a knife-thrust in the heart, said death-blow having been given by the hand of Roma Leigh, spinster, called Queen of a wandering tribe known as the Romana Gypsies.

"And you are to imprison this girl?" demanded Royal Rickerly of the coroner.

"It must be so, sir."

"I will offer bail for her."

"It must be offered to a judge, sir, who has the power to grant it, yet, who, I feel sure, will refuse bail."

"It will be infamous if he does," was the hot reply of the young sailor.

"And I too will offer surety for the Gypsy Queen," said Colonel Burbank.

"She must go to prison, sir, along with her people here as witnesses, and then you can see, gentlemen, what can be done to bail her out," replied the coroner.

"And must I go to prison?"

As she asked the question a look of fear crossed the beautiful face of Roma Leigh.

It was evident that a prison held terrors for her.

"You must," was the reply.

"The Queen of the Gypsies goes not to prison," and with the words Incah stepped forward and confronted the coroner.

"Ha! would you dare to resist?" cried the constable.

"No! I am no fool, for were a Gypsy to kill one of you, the earth would be red with our blood, I well know."

"You are many, we are but few."

"Then what do you mean?"

"I mean that your justice is a lie upon its face, for you condemn the innocent where the guilty stands before you."

"Who then is guilty?" demanded the coroner.

"I am."

"By Heaven, I thought it," muttered Royal Rickerly.

"You said her people had killed him," Colonel Burbank remarked, for he had heard the low-spoken words of the young sailor, as had Roma Leigh also.

"They feared he might be set free, and so prevented the possibility of such a thing," Royal Rickerly responded.

"You killed the man?" cried the coroner, in amazement.

"Yes, so what a fraud your Justice bears on her brow, for you just said that Roma Leigh, our Queen, was a murderess," and Incah spoke with an utter defiance in tone and manner.

"When did you kill him?"

"Last evening, upon my arrival here."

"Who was with you?"

"No one."

"You were alone?"

"Yes."

"Who told you of these bodies being here?"

"The Queen."

"Where?"

"At the camp."

"She sent you here?"

"Yes, with others."

"What others?"

"These," and he pointed to his comrades.

"You said you came alone?"

"I did, for I left word for ten men to follow me here."

"I came on alone."

"What did Roma Leigh tell you?"

"To come here, bury two bodies, and keep the bound man a prisoner."

"And what did you do?"

"I came, saw that crushed body under the cliff, and on the cliff that dead man."

"The third one was bound securely, with the sash of Roma Leigh, to an arbor."

"He was alive?"

"Certainly."

"Did you speak with him?"

"I did."

"What conversation passed between you?"

"He said that he had been bribed to come here and kill Roma Leigh, and he could get off from punishment by telling who it was that had hired him for the work, for he had been smart enough to dog the steps of his employer and find out."

"Did he tell you who it was?"

"No, for when he hinted that he might escape by confessing all, I drove my knife into his heart in punishment for his crime in trying to kill our Queen."

"Thank God!"

Who uttered the words but two knew, but all heard them distinctly, and it was supposed that one of the Gypsies had thus expressed himself that the intended assassin of their Queen had not escaped punishment.

But Royal Rickerly knew that his father had uttered the fervent ejaculation, oblivious to the fact that he had spoken aloud.

"And then?" asked the coroner, of Incah.

"I came down the cliff and met my men, so they are not to blame, I alone being guilty."

"This confession of course sets this young girl free," said Royal Rickerly, addressing the coroner.

"But the jury have—"

"Hang the jury! I for one will not allow you to carry this girl to prison after the confession of this man," warmly said Royal Rickerly, and as Colonel Burbank and others stepped forward to uphold him the coroner was forced to say that the jury had better reconsider the case.

This was done and Roma Leigh was set free.

"Am I to go with my people here?" she asked.

"Excepting this man who has confessed the crime," answered the coroner.

"And he is to go to prison?"

"Yes."

"Poor Incah!" and she stepped forward and laid her hand upon the man's head.

He smiled but made no reply, and she turned away, followed by the ten men who owed their release, with her, to the confession of Incah.

The bodies of the three desperadoes were buried under the cliff, the crowd departed in twos and threes, and the constable rode off to the county town with his Gypsy prisoner, a self-confessed murderer.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE GYPSY VISITOR.

THERE were three topics of conversation about the neighborhood of Crag Eden that proved to be more than a nine days' wonder.

The tragedy at the cliff, the self-accused Gypsy murderer and the return of Royal Rickerly, who had been given up as dead, were what interested the people.

The morning following the trial by coroner's jury at the cliff, the Gypsies had disappeared from camp-ground, seemingly dreading to remain, and leaving their comrade, Incah, to his fate.

They had seemed to realize that they could do nothing for him, that he was in the hands of the law, and if he got free he would follow them wherever they had gone.

At any rate they had disappeared as silently as they had come, and there was one who was glad to see that their tents were no longer visible from his window.

That one was Raynor Rickerly.

From the scene of the trial he had returned to Crag Eden, accompanied by his son and Colonel Burbank.

He had uttered no word, but seemed morose, and certainly had the appearance of one who enjoyed his own thoughts rather than conversation just then.

The colonel had remained to lunch at Crag Eden, upon condition that Royal Rickerly would return with him to Riverdale, but Raynor Rickerly had declined to go and so had been left alone.

After the departure of his son and their guest, he began to pace the piazza, his lips firmly set, his brow clouded.

"That fellow told the Gypsy he had dogged the steps of the one who bribed him and knew just who he was," he muttered, as he walked back and forth, his hands behind his back, his face bent downward.

"Can this be true, I wonder?"

"Yet it might be, for I recall now that a man followed me to the hotel, yes, up into the corridor and saw what room I entered."

"I was suspicious of him then, and now I am sure that it was a spy set by those men to discover who I was."

"But what became of the money I gave the men?"

"And the map with its full directions?"

"Surely they had something upon them, and that Gypsy got it."

"But the map would tell him nothing more than the locality, and prove to him that the men had indeed been set upon the track of Roma Leigh."

"They could learn nothing from that map,

and the revengeful Gypsy knifed him fortunately before he told what he knew.

"But what have I found out now as to this Gypsy Queen?"

"She is the image of the one I loved in the long ago; but it cannot be she, for no one would say this one is over eighteen."

"Then Roma Leigh, as I saw her the day I took her life, was a woman of nearly two-score years."

"Can she have had a daughter, I wonder?"

"It must be so, for how else can I reason this young girl's likeness to the Roma Leigh I knew, without becoming a superstitious fool and believing that she has the power to be both old and young."

"I fear Royal heard my exclamation when the Gypsy Incah said that he had knifed that scoundrel."

"I unconsciously spoke aloud, and only noticed that I had done so when Royal started and looked at me."

"How strange all this is, for my son, whom all believed to be dead, turns up at the very moment to prevent my hired assassins from killing that woman."

"It seems that I should be warned by this not again to take that woman's life."

"And yet must I again live a life of dread, again be a coward, and more, not avenge the past?"

"But did I not avenge the past when I took her life?"

"But then, who is this Roma Leigh?"

He beat his forehead with his clinched hand, and seemed to be in a mood bordering on insanity.

The past came before him with all its pleasure and pain.

He recalled his love-making to Roma Leigh, and then how he had cast her off, broken all vows, to marry Agnes Ashly.

He remembered the warning of the Gypsy Queen, and how she had kept her threats.

The death of his wife by poison, the kidnapping, and supposed murder of his son Rafael, came vividly before him, with all the dread he had felt that Royal would be the next victim.

Then he remembered his trail of vengeance, and the death scene in that cottage in a foreign land.

He recalled the gallant career of his son, his fears regarding his death, and then the coming back of the Romana Gypsies to camp beneath the very shadow of Crag Eden and bring a new terror to his heart by beholding upon the cliff, at the old trysting-place, the seeming spirit of Roma Leigh, and if not her ghost, certainly her counterpart.

His determination to free himself of her, ghost or flesh and blood though she be, and to so cover up his tracks that none should see his hand in the deed, had been thwarted by the return of his son whom he had begun to believe was dead.

Should he still risk to avenge the past, he wondered.

Such were the musings of the master of Crag Eden, and he paced to and fro upon the broad piazza for hours after the departure of Colonel Burbank and his son for Riverdale.

He was happy in the thought that he had his son once more with him; but could he live without dread, that after all that Royal Rickerly had passed through he had not returned home to meet his death?

If Roma Leigh, his Roma Leigh was really dead, had she not bequeathed her revenge to others, and would they not strike at his love to hurt his heart?

His son was all that he had, and upon him his whole life was centered.

It would kill him to have him taken from him. For himself he cared not, and he could even thank the revengeful Gypsy band that took his life; but the revenge must not strike him through his son.

As the man's thoughts ran thus an evil light came into his eyes and he bit his nether lip viciously.

Glancing down the hill road to the valley he saw a horseman approaching.

"It is not Royal," he muttered, and a moment after a curse broke from his lips.

He had recognized the picturesque costume of the Romana Gypsies.

The horseman came up the steep hill at a canter, and Raynor Rickerly knew that he bore some message to him.

The Gypsy passed in through the gate, rode up to the broad steps leading to the piazza and dismounted.

He made no salute, but took from his jacket a package heavily sealed, and handed it to Raynor Rickerly.

Then, without a word he turned on his heel, sprung upon his horse and rode away, leaving the master of Crag Eden holding in his trembling hands the mysterious package, which he seemed to lack the courage to open.

CHAPTER XXXI.

TWO LETTERS.

It was a long time before Raynor Rickerly broke the seal of the package handed him by the Gypsy horseman.

He seemed to shun doing so, and at last nerved himself to the task as though he was about to discover some dread secret.

The seal broken, a paper was revealed upon which was writing in a feminine hand upon which the planter gazed with strange interest:

"CAMP OF THE ROMANA GYPSIES.
SATURDAY.

"TO RAYNOR RICKERLY, ESQ.:—

"GREETING:—From Incah, Captain of the Romana Gypsies comes the within letter to you, and it comes with seal unbroken from his cell in prison, with the request that I place it in your hand through trusty messenger."

"I now do so.

"Of its contents I only know that he places himself in your hands, for life or death, and I too leave him to your mercy or hatred as you may see fit to visit upon him, for, with my people I go hence, never to return, unless Incah the Gypsies' captain, should die."

"Let these words—unless Incah, the Gypsies' captain, should die—be remembered by Raynor Rickerly, the master of Crag Eden, for should he forget them they will be recalled to his memory, as the end is not yet."

"ROMA LEIGH,
Queen of the Romana Gypsies."

Such was the letter that Raynor Rickerly read, and his face paled as he did so.

"Her writing!"

He fairly gasped the words.

"Yes, it is her writing, for how well I remember it."

"This but increases the maddening mystery."

"So she departs with her people, never to return unless Incah should die."

"That means unless he should hang, and it puts it upon me to prevent it."

"Now to this letter she sends within."

He spoke the words aloud and slowly, like one who was recalling a dream to memory.

Then he broke the seal of the inclosed letter, which was addressed simply to

"THE MASTER OF

"CRAG EDEN."

The seal had a stamp upon it of two crossed stilettos, while the one from the Queen had been a representation of the world, as though to show that they were world-wide wanderers.

The letter was not long, and was written in some characters that only a Gypsy, it was said, could read.

But Raynor Rickerly was the exception to that rule, for in his love-making days to Roma Leigh, she had taught him the secret characters of the Gypsy writing, and this Incah knew.

He had asked the constable to allow him to send a letter to his camp, bidding all good-by, as he resigned himself to the gallows or life imprisonment, and urging them to depart and leave him to his fate.

Constable Creighton had granted his request, for he was anxious to get rid of the Gypsies, fearing trouble.

Two letters had been written, one to Roma Leigh, the other to Raynor Rickerly.

The latter was sealed, but bore no address, and the Queen was told to direct and send it.

The letter to Roma Leigh was in the Gypsy characters, and so unintelligible to Constable Creighton.

But he saw no harm in letters, so dispatched a messenger to the Gypsy camp with the package.

Roma Leigh had carefully read all that was written to her, and then had sent the package inclosed in a letter from herself to the master of Crag Eden.

With this explanation, I will return to Raynor Rickerly after he had broken the seal of Incah's communication.

The planter's hand trembled as he held the sheet of paper.

It had been a long time since he had seen the Gypsies' secret cipher.

But it came back to him as he gazed upon it, and he read the letter addressed to him by the Gypsy captain.

It was as follows, when translated:

"IN PRISON.
SATURDAY.

"I address you, Raynor Rickerly, to have you save me from the gallows."

"I will be tried, and under other circumstances, might be even cleared, or merely sent to prison for a short term; but those who try me hate Gypsies, and they wish to frighten them away from this country."

"They fear them, too, I may add, and so my trial will be but a farce and I will be hanged."

"This hanging will not be far off either, for the matter will be quickly settled with me."

"A Romana Gypsy has never been hanged."

"And one must not be."

"Therefore appeal to you, Raynor Rickerly, to save me."

"I have written to my Queen."

"I have told her to depart with our people, to go on her wandering way, leaving me to your mercy, and all would be well, for ere long I would overtake my people."

"She will depart and I will be left in your hands."

"You are to save me, Raynor Rickerly."

"You may be inclined to refuse; but a word to the wise is sufficient."

"I did not tell the whole truth to the coroner."

"I know who it was that bribed those men to kill Roma Leigh."

"The man confessed to me."

"He told me how he had sent a spy to dog you,

and you had been followed to the hotel, to a certain room."

"He found out who occupied that room, and saw a different man come out from the one who had entered it."

"You had gone in disguise to bribe your assassins to do their work."

"You gave him a map and directions."

"How wise men will often do foolish things, for you wrote the directions in your natural hand, and the map could only have been taken from a chart of your land, it was so exact as to distance and all else."

"This man supposed I would spare his life when he told me all."

"He did not know me."

"I got his map and directions, took his money and that on the bodies of the others, left nothing to tell the tale on them, and then put my knife in his heart."

"I wove the map into my long hair, so it was not found when I was searched, and put the money in my belt, so have that, as I was allowed to keep it."

"This is my hold on you, Raynor Rickerly, so it will be but proper for you to save me from the gallows."

"If not, then the whole story of your life must come out, for remember, the day when Roma Leigh, in the long ago, pledged herself to become your wife, you became a Gypsy."

"With these facts I leave my life in your hands."

"I will be day and night on the watch for you, and will expect to go free rather than hang, for I feel very sure you do not care to have the world know of your disgrace, a dishonor that will fall upon your son, should it become known that his father is a Gypsy, and in fact has done many deeds with murder in his soul."

"I await your pleasure, or my death on the gallows, whichever it may be, with perfect composure."

"INCAH."

Such was the letter from the Gypsy captain, and Raynor Rickerly knew that he lay at his mercy.

Long he thought over the matter, then reread the letter and said, firmly:

"I must save him!"

"Save who, father?"

And Royal Rickerly stood by his father's side, having approached unseen, so deeply was he wrapt up in his meditations.

The strong man gasped, turned pale, but controlling himself by a mighty effort, said:

"A poor fellow who has written me for aid, or he will be sold out; but I am glad to see you back, my son."

And the master of Crag Eden was himself once more.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE HERMIT HUNTER.

UPON the banks of the river, some dozen miles or so from Crag Eden, there was a rude cabin situated under the shelter of a bluff.

A garden-patch was near, surrounded by a rustic fence, and upon this, the river and the forests the dweller in the lone cabin depended for his living.

The man who lived there was known as the Hermit Hunter, and very few were aware that he bore the name of Dick Surry.

He had come there years before, and had enough money to buy half a hundred acres land.

On this plot he had built his cabin and fenced in a garden, after which he began the existence of a hunter and fisherman.

He was very lucky in fishing, and knew just where the finest trout were to be found, and always found plenty of game.

Twice a week he sold to the village market his game and fish, and a storekeeper purchased his pelts, so that it was said that he made a good living, as his expenses were next to nothing.

He wore a long beard, his hair fell below his shoulders, and he dressed like a plainsman.

From whence he had come no one knew, and he would never speak of himself.

That he was hiding from the law for some crime committed all believed, and yet he was a man of gentle manner, had an education, and broke no law of the community where he lived.

One day, years before the attack of the three assassins on Roma Leigh, Raynor Rickerly had been riding along the river-bank hunting and had stopped at the cabin of the Hermit Hunter.

He heard groans within, and entering found the strong man prostrate with brain-fever.

Uncared for he soon would have died, and so the planter set to work to do all in his power for the unfortunate sufferer.

He made him as comfortable as possible, and then set off for Crag Eden.

But within a few hours he was back again, accompanied by Doctor Lovering and a servant, the latter bearing many things to make the patient comfortable.

The doctor administered medicine, seemed surprised that in his delirium the hunter spoke in a foreign tongue, and departed.

But Raynor Rickerly and his negro servant remained to care for the sick man.

The next day the doctor returned, reported a great change for the better, and went on his rounds; but Raynor Rickerly did not desert the invalid.

Thus it went on until Dick Surry was out of danger, and the master of Crag Eden, who had proven himself such a good nurse, returned to his home, leaving his servant, however, to wait on the hunter until he was once more fully restored to health.

"You have saved my life, Mr. Rickerly—you, a rich man, have devoted yourself to me, a poor wretch, and I can never forget you for it."

"But tell me, did I rave in my delirium?" said the hunter, as the planter was about to leave.

"Yes, your mind wandered."

"Did I speak in English?" was the quick question.

"No, in Spanish."

"Ah! but you do not understand Spanish, do you, sir?" and the man seemed to anxiously await reply.

"I do."

"My God!"

"Do not worry yourself, Surry, for any confessions you made in delirium are sacred."

"Your past is not my affair, and Doctor Lovering and Jack do not understand Spanish, so be at ease, my friend."

"God bless you, Raynor Rickerly, is my prayer."

"I came here a fugitive from justice, for I had taken human life."

"I was a soldier stationed upon the Mexican frontier, and madly loved a ranchero's daughter."

"She became my wife, and several years after, when in New Orleans, my best friend, as I believed, one who owed his life to me, won her from me."

"They fled together, and I pursued."

"I meant not to kill her, for I intended to forgive and carry her home with me."

"But alas! when I fired upon him, she threw herself upon his breast and the bullet pierced her heart."

"Then I killed him, and fled."

"A ruined man, I wandered about until I found this retreat, and here I settled, content to pass the remainder of my life, and better had it been, Planter Rickerly, had you not nursed me back to life, and have let me die."

"Such, sir, is the secret you hold, and in my ravings I upbraided her, and him, and I always spoke to her, and to him, in Spanish, for they were both of them Mexicans."

"Your delirious ravings told me as much, Surry, and I repeat, your secret is safe with me," said Raynor Rickerly.

After that the planter and the hunter met occasionally, and the two always seemed firm friends.

A haunch of venison, a fine trout, a bunch of quail often were left at Crag Eden by the hunter, and the planter knew him too well to offer to pay him for what he knew was a gift to him.

The day after the reception of the letter from Incah, Raynor Rickerly mounted his horse and rode away alone, giving the impression to his son that he was going to the village.

He had seen on arising that morning that the Gypsies had broken camp during the night and disappeared.

This fact told him that they had indeed left Incah in his hands, to save or let perish, as it might be.

Royal told him that he would not go out that day, or at least until that evening, but devote himself to looking about the house and writing his report to the Secretary of the Navy, sending it along with his resignation, for he intended to give up the life of a sailor and devote himself to planting.

His father heard this with joy, and said:

"As soon as you decide, Royal, upon your marriage day, I will turn over to you Viewlands, which was your mother's home, you remember, and left to you and poor Rafael."

"I will have it put in fine condition, thoroughly refurbished, stock the stables and plantation for you, and it shall be your wedding present."

"So let me know what day you and Violet set for your marriage as soon as possible."

"I will, father, and I thank you; but I suppose you will still live at Crag Eden?"

"Oh, yes, this is my home until I die."

"The will handed down like an heirloom from my grandfather and father says that the elder of the name of Rickerly, on the male side, shall hold it as his castle, as it were, and with it the soil it stands upon, though every other acre be sold."

"This is my castle, Royal, and here I will remain until I die, and then it becomes your home, my son."

"But Viewlands is a charming place, the very home for a bride, and I will make it a very Eden of beauty for you and Violet, for I have a desire that you bring not your wife here, for there are cruel memories about this old place."

Roy Rickerly made no reply, and soon after his father departed on his ride.

He took the river road instead of the one to the village.

Then he branched off into the path that carried him by the cliff, more than ever to be shunned since the last tragedy there.

But, with stern face, white with emotion that surged up from his heart, the master of Crag Eden halted and gazed upon the scene.

The two graves, nearly effaced, which told of the far bygone were there, and near by the three newly-made mounds that covered the remains

of the men whom he had bribed in Baltimore to take the life of Roma Leigh.

For some little time he gazed upon the scene, then, dismounting, he ascended the ridge path to the arbor.

He there remained for some minutes, as though held by a morbid fascination to the spot, and with a sigh turned and retraced his steps to his horse.

Mounting once more he rode on, kept up the valley road, and soon after reached the highway bordering the river.

This he followed until he turned into a path and drew rein at the cabin of the Hermit Hunter, who was seated before his door smoking his pipe, but quickly arose and greeted the planter upon his arrival.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE PLOT TO RESCUE.

"Ah, Planter Rickerly, I am glad to see you."

"Dismount and have a seat," called out the Hermit Hunter, as the planter rode up.

He was a tall man, with broad shoulders, and though little over thirty his hair was gray and his beard full of silver threads, which gave him at the first glance the appearance of being an older man by a score of years than he really was.

His eyes were piercing and restless, and there was an expression of resigned sadness upon his face, which was handsome and striking.

His movements were quick, and his carriage indicated soldierly training.

In response to the invitation the planter dismounted, and taking the seat brought out for him by the hunter he said:

"Surry, I have come to see you upon a very important matter."

"Yes, Mr. Rickerly, you will find a willing listener."

"So I feel."

"Has anything gone wrong with you, sir?"

"Well, yes; but when were you in the village last?"

"Last evening, for I took in a supply of game and fish."

"You heard news then?"

"I am not a news-gatherer, sir, but I did overhear a conversation that interested me, for it was your name that was mentioned."

"Allow me to congratulate you upon the return home of your son."

"Thank you, Surry; but what did you hear?"

"Of Lieutenant Royal's return, and that he was just in time to become the hero of an adventure, in which Roma Leigh, the Gypsy Queen, and the daughter of Colonel Burbank, were mixed up."

"I will tell you the story," and the planter made known the facts of the tragedy on the cliff, the hunter listening with the deepest interest.

Then he told of the affairs following, on the succeeding day, ending with the arrest of Incah for the murder of one of the desperadoes.

"Why, they will not surely hang him for that?"

"They will, Surry."

"The fellow deserved death."

"Granted; but it was a murder nevertheless."

"I think the jury will let him go."

"No."

"You seem sure, sir."

"He is a Gypsy."

"Ah yes, I had not thought of it."

"They wish to get rid of a Gypsy, so as to keep the band away from this neighborhood."

"Exactly so, Surry."

"Have you any interest in this man?"

The planter was silent for a moment, and then said in a low tone:

"Surry, I can trust you?"

"With your life, sir."

"You know that I hold a secret of yours, Surry, and now I will tell you a secret of my life."

"You need not, sir, unless you wish."

"But I wish your aid."

"Give me your orders what I shall do, and you shall have my aid to its full extent, Planter Rickerly."

"You are a noble fellow, Surry, and I will tell you that you will never regret helping me in this matter."

"I will do all in my power for you, Mr. Rickerly."

"I felt that you would when I came to you."

"The truth is, Surry, that man must not die."

"The Gypsy?"

"Yes."

"You wish to save him?"

"Yes, I must."

"It will be no easy task."

"I know that, but it must be done, Surry."

"Let us see what to do in the matter, and then we can act."

"He is in the village jail?"

"Yes."

"The keeper is Hank Romer?"

"Yes."

"There is no one else at the jail, is there, sir?"

"No, for Romer is a bachelor, and by night he alone guards the prisoners, when there are any there, and by day there is another man on duty."

"Are there any other prisoners there now besides the Gypsy?"

"I do not know; but I think not, unless it be a runaway negro or two."

"The jail stands in an isolated place, apart from the village?"

"Yes."

"Well, Planter Rickerly, our plan will be to gain entrance in some way, master Hank Romer without harming him, tie and gag him, release your man and depart."

"But Romer is a perfect giant."

"I do not fear matching strength with him, sir; but we must go in disguise."

"Of course; but how will we gain admittance?"

The hunter was lost in deep meditation for awhile.

Then he said:

"I will shave off my beard, cut my hair short, and black up and dress as a negro, while you can disguise yourself in some way and pretend to be an officer from a distant county, returning with a prisoner that you had gone after."

"The irons on my hands need not be fastened and when Romer opens the door I can spring upon him, while you hasten to get the keys and release the Gypsy."

"We will go late at night, and you can have a horse ready for the Gypsy, when he can ride to a certain point on the river where you must have a boat in which he can continue his flight."

"You can return home, I come back here, and the jailer can be left bound until they find him in the morning, which will give the Gypsy some eight or nine hours' start of all pursuit, while we will never be suspected."

"What do you think of the plan, Mr. Rickerly?"

"An excellent one, and just what we wish to make it a success."

"Now to fix upon a disguise, and the night on which to do the work, and I will return home to see about securing a horse and a boat for the Gypsy."

Having decided fully upon the plans of action, the planter mounted his horse and rode on to the village.

He knew that the road would take him by the jail, and he wished to look over matters as they were.

The village was a pretty one, nestling away at the head of a valley, and the jail was the first place to come to in the approach to it on the highway along which the planter rode.

It was a stone structure, built solidly for the purpose for which it was intended.

The living rooms of the jailer below, and a dozen cells on the floor above comprised all there was of the building, while a brick wall, ten feet high and with broken bottles on top served as a barrier to escape from the yard about the jail.

A hut in one corner of the yard was the home of an old deaf negress who did the cooking for the jailer and his prisoners, when there were any of the latter, for it was not very often that Hank Romer had prisoners under his charge to worry him.

As he approached the jail, from the hillside, the planter saw that one of the cells had an occupant.

It was Incah, the Gypsy captain, and they both recognized each other at the same moment, but did not give any sign of recognition as a crowd of a dozen boys and village idlers stood on the hillside gazing in gaping wonder at the prisoner, who seemed hardly conscious of their existence there.

The jailer stood at the massive, iron, nail-studded door, that opened in the wall, taking advantage of the breeze without, for the day was sultry, and he bowed politely to the planter as he rode by, saying:

"Glad to hear of your son's return, Mr. Rickerly, and I hope he is well, sir?"

"Yes, thank you, quite well," and the stern-faced planter, and object of awe to all who knew him, rode on his way down into the village.

He stopped at the post-office, his mail was brought out to him, and after visiting the village attorney, on some matter of business, Raynor Rickerly rode homeward by the highway that led directly by the plantation of Crag Eden.

Three nights from this the Gypsy will escape, and Roma Leigh will know that it was by my act, and she has said, that if Incah did not die, she would never return again to these parts."

"Can there be such a thing for me as happiness in the future, I wonder, a perfect freedom from dread of evil?"

So mused the master of Crag Eden as he rode homeward that pleasant afternoon after having formed his plot to rescue the Gypsy captain.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AN UNLOOKED-FOR RESULT.

JAILER ROMER was a man who retired early. He was supposed to be a night-guard, and yet such a thing as remaining up all night to keep

watch and ward over the jail had never occurred to him.

He had never known an attempt to break jail, no prisoner had ever escaped, and so when his hour for going to bed came he went the rounds, hung the keys on a nail by his cot, which was put in the hall from habiteach night, rather than as a precaution, and then lay down with his clothes on.

After his assistant came in the morning, Jailer Romer was wont to undress and go to bed for a few hours in his own room, as though he had been up all night.

It was a dark night, and rain was threatening, when Hank Romer went the rounds of his jail before retiring.

He looked in on the Gypsy captain from habit, bade him good-night, and went down to his cot to soon be fast asleep.

Incah was ironed heavily, for a manacle was about his right ankle and another upon his left wrist.

The chains were attached to rings in the wall, but they were several feet in length and gave him a chance to move about.

He bade the jailer good-night and also lay down upon his cot, dropping to sleep as quietly as though he had the conscience of a young child.

Lucy, the old deaf negress, went to bed with the chickens, so to speak, for she retired at night-fall.

But she was up with the lark, had breakfast ready for the jailer by seven, and her cooking was of a kind that had caused a prisoner who had spent months in the jail to regret that he had been proven "not guilty," and would have to depart.

Jailer Romer had slept about an hour when the bell over his head rung out.

He was awake in an instant.

Who had come to disturb his slumbers? he wondered.

Throwing on his coat and slipping his feet into his slippers, he took up his lantern and moved out to the iron-barred gate in the wall.

The night was very dark, and the clouds were threatening a storm.

"Who is there?" called out the jailer.

"Constable Case from Blackwood, with a negro prisoner."

"I want to jail him with you over night."

"All right," replied Hank Romer, for he had heard of Constable Case, of Blackwood, though he had never met him.

He unfastened the bars, opened the massive door, and saw two horsemen.

One was a negro, to all appearance, and his hands looked to be handcuffed behind him.

The other was a man with slouch hat, heavy beard, coat with collar standing up and whose face was hardly visible.

"Glad to meet you, friend, and we'll jug your man first, then stable the horses, after which I'll look you up something to eat," said the hospitable jailer.

The horses were led in and hitched, the man and his prisoner dismounted, and Jailer Romer led the way to the jail.

Hardly had he closed the door when the black man turned upon him, seized him by the throat and hissed forth:

"Surrender, or you are a dead man!"

At the same moment the white man seized the lantern, grasped the keys and ran rapidly upstairs to the floor above.

He heard the struggle below, but heeded it not, and hastily finding a key thrust it into the lock of the cell-door that shut the Gypsy captain in.

He threw open the door, took from the bunch of keys one that unlocked the manacles upon the ankle and wrist of the prisoner and soon set him free.

The Gypsy had arisen as he heard the struggle below, and calmly gazed into the face of his rescuer.

"It is a good disguise, but I know you."

"I knew you would come," he said with the utmost coolness.

The rescuer made no reply, but simply put the lantern on the table, turned down his collar as though the heat oppressed him, and then unlocked the irons.

"Come," he said.

"You have others to aid you?"

"One."

"The jailer?"

"Is a prisoner, come!"

The speaker led the way down the stairs, lighting his way with his lantern, and the Gypsy followed.

They had nearly reached the door, when a form appeared before them.

"You did not kill him, Surry! great God! you did not kill him?" cried Raynor Rickerly as his eyes fell upon the form before them.

"No! I killed him!"

"Hands up, or I send you after him!"

It was Jailer Hank Romer who spoke the words.

The hall lamp now showed that his face was stained with blood, and he seemed to stand upright with an effort.

But while he rested against the wall with one hand, in the other he held a pistol leveled at the two men who faced him.

"I know you now, Planter Rickerly, in spite of your disguise."

"Handsup, or I will kill you and the Gypsy!"

Suddenly the hands of Raynor Rickerly went up, one above his head, the other on a level with his eye.

Then followed a flash and Jailer Romer sunk down upon the brick flooring of the jail, a dead man.

"My God! he has killed my friend."

"Come, we must get out of this," and the lantern flashed upon the prostrate form of the hunter, lying motionless with upturned face.

The Gypsy bent over the hunter, rested his hand upon the heart and said shortly:

"Dead!"

"Come!"

The voice of Royal Rickerly was hoarse with suppressed emotion, and he quickly left the jail, the Gypsy at his heels.

"Take that horse, for it is the one the hunter rode here for you."

"Here is gold, and at the Riverdale Ford you will find a boat tied to a large gum tree on the bank."

"It is twenty miles there, so do not spare your horse, and turn him loose when you reach the ford and he will return home, for the hunter took him from a stable near here."

"I will go with you to the forks of the road, and there you can give me the map and directions you hold."

The Gypsy sprung upon the bare back of the horse, which was a good animal, seized the rope halter, and as Raynor Rickerly had also mounted, they started off at a gallop.

"The body of your friend will be recognized," said the Gypsy.

"It cannot be helped, and it is better so, for he will be looked upon as the one who aided you to escape," and the planter, though regretting the sad end of Dick Surry, was glad that it would stop all investigation, for as the hunter was really unknown, as regarded his antecedents, it would be the more thought that he was employed by the Gypsies to free their captain.

He thought that he had taken the life of Hank Romer also weighed upon the planter.

He felt that the jailer had been doing his duty only, and yet, had he not killed him the result to him would have been fearful, for he would have told who the rescuer of the Gypsy really was, for he had recognized him.

"The body of poor Surry will be found in the morning, and recognized in spite of his blackened face and having shaved off his beard."

"It will be supposed that the Gypsies hired him to set Incah free, and thus the matter will end; but it adds another weight to my conscience."

So said the planter, and soon after he drew rein at the forks of the road and said:

"Here we part, Gypsy, and with the start you have you will easily escape."

"A hard storm is coming up which will obliterate all tracks, and here is a bundle of clothing for you, so that you need not wear your Gypsy costume."

"You have said, and so has Roma Leigh, that you will never visit this part of the country again?"

"We have so said."

"Give me those papers, tell Roma Leigh that I saved you from the gallows, and let this end all."

"I have not the papers, for the jailer took them from me to-day."

"Gypsy, you lie!" cried the planter, and following his words came a flash and report.

The Gypsy reeled, and away dashed his horse.

Raynor Rickerly sat upon his horse like one struck dumb with amazement.

Then, with a bitter oath he spurred on in chase of the fugitive.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE STORY OF A WOUNDED MAN.

RAYNOR RICKERLY had ridden but a short distance when his horse came to a sudden halt.

There in the road before him stood the animal which he was in pursuit of.

But he was riderless.

But in the road, the long rope of the halter wound about his body was the Gypsy.

Dismounting the planter approached him.

He spoke to the Gypsy, but no response came.

The Gypsy lay motionless and his horse remained by him, held by the stout rope.

"Incah!"

Still no reply.

Then the planter bent over him, felt of his heart and his hand became moist.

There was a wound there.

It was where his bullet had cut its way.

But was it fatal? This the planter soon ascertained.

The man was stone dead.

The trembling hands of the planter then grasped the long, braided hair of the Gypsy.

In one of the braids he found some papers, cleverly braided into the hair and securely hidden.

Eagerly he took them out and then he searched the body thoroughly.

The gold he did not disturb, except what he had given him.

Mounting his horse he rode away, leaving the Gypsy lying where he had fallen, and the stout rope, knotted about him, holding the horse fast.

"It will look as though he had been wounded in escaping, rode thus far and fell, having tied the rope about him as a support."

"My tracks are certainly covered up this night, and Roma Leigh will never suspect me of killing the man after setting him free."

As he spoke the planter urged his horse into a gallop, for the thunder fairly shook the hills, the lightning flashed most vividly and the storm was at hand.

Soon the rain began to fall in torrents, and Raynor Rickerly was wet through.

But he heeded not this, and soon after midnight reached his home.

The stableman took his horse, and entering the house he found Black Pink up awaiting him.

"I was gittin' scared about you, massa; but yer supper is ready waitin', soon as yer changes yer clothin'," said the faithful negress.

The man made no reply, but went to his room and put on dry clothing, after which he swallowed a glass half-full of brandy.

"Where is Master Royal?" he asked.

"In bed two hours ago, sah."

"I do not care for supper, Black Pink, so go to bed."

The negress obeyed in silence, but she looked disappointed, for she had spread a repast which she thought would tempt her master.

Then Raynor Rickerly began to pace the library, his head bent, his hands behind him, as was his wont.

At last he unfolded the papers he had taken from the braided hair of the dead Gypsy.

There were blood-stains upon them, and he shuddered.

Opening the papers he looked at them a moment and then turned deadly pale.

"My God! these are copies."

"Who has the originals?" he groaned forth between his shut teeth.

He examined them over and over again.

They were only copies. Going to the dining-room, he seized the decanter of brandy and poured out a glassful.

This he dashed off and then sought his room, threw himself upon the bed and tried to sleep.

But he could not, for he knew that the pelting rain was falling in the upturned face of the dead Gypsy, he whom he had killed—for what?

He knew that the dead jailer lay in the corridor of the jail, also dead by his hand.

He knew that his faithful ally and friend, Dick Surry, the Hermit Hunter, had been left in the jail also.

Then the fearful thought flashed over him:

"Was the jailer really dead?"

"Was Surry dead?"

At last, as the dawn broke he fell into a deep sleep.

Several hours after he awoke at the call of Darius, who told him that breakfast was ready, and the young master wished to see him as soon as possible.

He dressed with trembling hands, but upon leaving his room went to the sideboard and braced his nerves with a stiff mint julep, after which he went out upon the piazza where he was told by Darius Royal was awaiting him, and that a visitor was there.

He heard the voice of the visitor before he saw him, and recognized who it was.

He started, but he was perfectly cool when he stepped out upon the piazza.

"Good-morning, father. I feared you were ill, you slept so late, for it is nearly ten o'clock," said Royal.

"I do not feel very well, my son, and overslept myself."

"Good-morning, Constable Creighton."

"You are in time to breakfast with us."

The constable was surprised.

Breakfast at Crag Eden for him would be a treat indeed.

The master was most agreeable that morning.

Then Constable Creighton was hungry.

He had ridden far, fast and furious, and more, he had had no breakfast.

He had just come over to tell the news, which, of course, would interest the gentlemen.

Then the constable was shown to a room to make his toilet, a mint-julep was given to him to sharpen his appetite, and the three sat down to breakfast, the master of Crag Eden most remarkably indifferent to the news brought by the officer of the law.

"Now, Constable Creighton, what have you to tell us?" said Mr. Rickerly, and his manner was really pleasant.

"The Gypsy escaped last night, sir."

The constable sprung this news upon his hearers with the air of a man who felt that he would amaze by what he said.

"Impossible!"

"Escaped!"

"Yes, planter; yes, lieutenant."

"But how could he escape?"

"It was a well-arranged plot, gentlemen, I

"assure you, and the man who aided him was none other than Dick Surry, the Hermit Hunter."

"No!"

"I do not know him," said Royal.

"No, he has not been here very long, and yet you must remember him, Royal, for he came before you left for Mexico."

"Ah, yes; I recall him now."

"He aided him, you say, Creighton?" asked the planter.

"Yes, sir; but we have him fast."

"You recaptured him?"

And the question of Royal Rickerly was most timely, for it turned the eyes of the constable to him, and the start and sudden pallor of Planter Rickerly went unnoticed.

"No, we did not capture the Gypsy, yet he is dead; but we got the hunter."

"Indeed?"

"How was it?" asked the planter.

"Well, gentlemen, the deaf old negress at the jail came to my house this morning soon after sun-up and said that Jailer Romer was dead and a wounded man, all blacked up, was lying at the gate and offered her money to hide him."

"I went there and found Hank Romer dead, stone dead, gentlemen, and the wounded man, after awhile, I recognized as Dick Surry, the Hermit Hunter."

"He was wounded in the side by a knife-thrust, had a blow on the head that cut to the bone, and was all blacked up, while he had tucked his long hair up under his hat and shaved off his beard."

"He was a hard-looking fellow, I can tell you."

"Will he die?"

"I think not, sir, for I sent for Doctor Lovering, and he said he could pull him through."

"He made no secret that he had come there to free the prisoner and that the Gypsy had escaped, doubtless believing him dead, for he had been stunned by the blow."

"He said the Gypsy was his friend, and that he had pretended to be a negro, with a message for the jailer, and thus got entrance."

"Then he had snatched the keys from Hank, ran up to the Gypsy's cell, unlocked the door, threw him the keys to rid himself of his irons and then had gone to meet the jailer who was advancing upon him."

"They had fought, and he had been wounded, then fell, striking his head and becoming unconscious."

"He says the Gypsy and the jailer must have fought, for he came to find Hank dead and the prisoner gone."

"I went in chase of the fugitive, starting a dozen men out also; but the hard rain had washed out all tracks."

"Still, I concluded that he would make for the river, so took the road below here and found him at the forks, five miles from here."

"You found him?"

"Yes, planter, and he was stone dead, so that carries out the words of the hunter that he had a fight with Hank after he fell unconscious."

"He was lying in the road, and standing over him was Burt Greene's black mare, held by the halter rope, which had gotten tangled about the body."

"The Gypsy had started for the river, wounded as he was, but died on the way."

"He had a belt of gold on him, and that was all, and I want to ask you, planter, for a team to carry the body back to the village."

"Certainly, Creighton, and we will ride over with you to where he lies," replied the planter, and breakfast being over the three set out on horseback for the scene, which Raynor Rickerly knew but too well.

But there was a great dread in his heart, for Dick Surry was a prisoner, and would surely be tried for the murder of the jailer.

Still the hunter had told a story that in no way compromised him, and that was one cause for congratulation.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

TRUE AS STEEL.

UPON the arrival of Constable Creighton, with Mr. Rickerly and his son, at the place where the remains of the Gypsy lay, they found that a crowd had gathered there.

The body was placed in the wagon brought from Crag Eden, and the whole party started for the village.

Raynor Rickerly's calm face concealed his anxiety, for he wished to know just what the situation was at the village.

Would Dick Surry, with the fear of death before his eyes, confess to the truth?

That was to be seen.

Arriving at the jail they found a vast crowd assembled there.

The body of the dead jailer was laid out in his own room, while the wounded hunter was lying in the main hall.

He had told his story, and, as has been seen by what the constable said, had wholly shielded the planter.

Upon himself he had let all the blame rest, and his story no one doubted, for his words seemed to be borne out by what facts had been developed.

The coroner and his jury were of course there, and had to sit upon the case.

They heard the story of the hunter, viewed the dead bodies of the jailer and the Gypsy, and then came to the verdict that:

"Richard Surry, hunter, and antecedents unknown, had attempted the rescue of the late prisoner, Incah, a Gypsy, from friendly or financial motives, and had gained ingress to the county jail by misrepresentation."

"That the hunter had attacked the jailer, set the prisoner free, and had been severely wounded by the late jailer, Hank Romer."

"That the said Gypsy had escaped, though wounded, and had fallen from his horse to die in the roadway, shot by Jailer Romer in the discharge of his duty."

"Furthermore, that Jailer Romer, in the proper discharge of duty, had seriously wounded the said hunter, Richard Surry, who with malice and intent had shot down Jailer Romer while engaged in his legal duties."

The result of all this was that the hunter was placed under guard, and was to be held for the murder of the jailer.

The body of the brave keeper of the jail was buried with high honors in the village graveyard, and the Gypsy was taken in charge by the master of Crag Eden, who said that he would bury the remains at his expense in the spot where the Romana Gypsies had laid several of their people away to rest.

It was considered an act of kindness on the part of the master of Crag Eden to do this; but then, the people could not see behind the motive that prompted the act.

With a few others the master of Crag Eden had gone in to see the wounded hunter, but he had declined to view the remains of the dead jailer.

The hunter, Dr. Lovering said, would doubtless pull through all right.

He had a splendid constitution, a powerful frame, and took his dangerous situation with a coolness that was remarkable.

"The truth is," the doctor said, "he knows he will hang if he gets well, and so he prefers death."

"I always thought there was something mysterious about the man."

The eyes of the hunter met those of Raynor Rickerly as he entered, but only as they turned upon others.

He merely acknowledged the bow of Mr. Rickerly, and then looked away.

But the planter said:

"I am sorry to see you suffering and in trouble, Surry."

The hunter made no reply, and the planter continued:

"It is most unfortunate, and I feel for you indeed."

"Thank you."

It was all that the hunter said, and Raynor Rickerly passed on.

Back to Crag Eden rode the planter and his son, while the wagon bore the body of the Gypsy captain away for burial on the land that belonged to his wandering people.

The village paper gave an account of the whole affair, and also spoke of the kindness of the master of Crag Eden in burying the body of Incah, the Gypsy, at his own expense, and hinted at some strange influence which had caused the mysterious Hermit Hunter to risk his life in the bold attempt to rescue the captain of the Gypsies from prison.

After dinner at home, Royal Rickerly asked his father to ride over to Riverdale with him to spend the evening; but the planter pleaded fatigue, and when his son had gone, went to his library and began his tireless pacing to and fro.

An hour he spent thus, with head bent down and hands clasped behind his back.

Then he sat down to his private desk and began to write.

He wrote in the Gypsy cipher, and his letter bore no date, or place at the head.

It was as follows:

"ROMA LEIGH:—

"I did my duty in the rescue of your friend, Incah, the captain of your people."

"I planned his escape, but unfortunately he was wounded, the jailer was killed, and the man who was my ally fell seriously wounded, and unless I can arrange his escape he will be hanged for murder."

"Incah fled, but his wound proved to be mortal and he fell from his horse and died."

"I had him buried to day in the graveyard of your people, and made upon his grave the symbol of the Romana Gypsies over their dead."

"The belt of gold that Incah had on, with his weapons, and other things, I will to-night secretly place in his grave, in a box, and there they await your command."

"The past has been a bitter one to me, and to you, be you the Roma Leigh of the past, or another, for I am deceived I admit."

"You pledged yourself to never again return to Virginia, did I keep faith and set free Incah."

"I did my duty, but Fate was against him."

"I therefore demand of you the keeping of your pledge."

"Let the dead past be buried, let all rest as now it is, for years are creeping on and my head is whitening under grief and remorse."

"To you and your people I wish happiness and success forever."

"Farewell, Roma Leigh, and a last farewell may it be."

RAYNOR RICKERLY."

The name was also signed in the Gypsy cipher, and the letter was placed in a stout envelope and addressed simply:

"ROMA LEIGH."

The planter then secured a stout box, and placing in it the things found on the body of Incah by the coroner, he left the mansion by a side door, sought a shed, and taking therefrom a shovel went down the ridge road.

He forded the river, seemingly unmindful of getting wet, and boldly approached the graveyard of the Gypsies.

The newly made grave of Incah was opened, the box placed therein, and then the mound was made up and smoothed over as before, after which, with a knife, the planter cut into the earth a Gypsy symbol which he knew they always marked upon a burial-place of one of their people.

Then in the darkness he hastened away, recrossed the river, and sought the home, unseen by any one.

It was midnight, and he retired to his room; but upon his heart lay the weight of woe he had brought upon Dick Surry, the Hermit Hunter.

Could he set that man free, with his life no longer haunted by the fear of Roma Leigh, then the future after all might have some happiness for him.

Yet, between him and that happiness rose the form of the wounded hunter, who had proven himself true as steel to him.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A SPY.

IN a secluded glen, not far from a Western city, was a camp so picturesque and with a people so strange as its denizens that many were drawn from far and wide to see them.

It was the camp of the Romana Gypsies, and they had pitched their tents for a stay of several weeks.

They had their guards to keep curious visitors aloof, and yet otherwise went on with their daily routine of work or pleasure as though no eyes were upon them.

The business men of the camp sold, bought or exchanged horses, a few of the old women disposed of odd pieces of workmanship they had made, the children played at will, and the more retiring among the maidens kept within their tents or gayly-painted wagons.

There was one tent covered with cabalistic letters and symbols that was the Temple of Fate, and herein Roma Leigh, the Queen, was ready to unfold the future, or read the past of those who wished their fortunes told.

The beauty of the Gypsy Queen brought her more young men than maidens, yet she seemed to wholly ignore tender glances, compliments and sentimental nonsense.

Around the camp were gathered many people, in carriages, on horseback and afoot, come from the town and surrounding country to see the Gypsies.

But as night drew near the crowd began to disperse, and when the sun sunk to rest the Gypsies were alone, their camp-fires gleaming, the sound of voices in song heard here and there, with the notes of a harp swept by a skillful hand rendering the scene weird and beautiful.

Suddenly into the camp rode a horseman.

He was dark-faced, travel-stained and weary-looking.

Though not clad in the costume of the Gypsies he seemed to be at once recognized and a hush fell upon the camp.

A boy took his horse, he nodded right and left in silence to those who saluted him, and made his way to the tent of Roma Leigh.

She had just finished her supper, and had taken up her guitar, when the words fell upon her ears:

"Roma Leigh, Campana begs admittance."

She started at the words, cast aside the guitar, and said quickly:

"Campana is welcome."

The man entered, and placing his hand upon his heart bowed low before his Queen, who rose and grasped his hand.

"Sit down; you look weary, so refresh yourself before you tell your story."

"No, I am only tired from my long ride."

"I will speak now, then eat and rest."

"You have news?"

"Yes."

"Of Incah?"

"I have."

"Tell me all."

"As you bade me, Roma Leigh, I remained behind to spy upon the movements of the master of Crag Eden, and, should he not aid Incah to escape, to rescue him myself."

"With my long black hair cut close, and without my costume, no one suspected me of being a Gypsy."

"I started in business as a peddler, and in that way saw many people."

"I knew before very long that Incah would surely hang, so I laid my plans to be ready to save him, should the master of Crag Eden fail you."

"But I soon found out that he was at work,

and had secured an able ally in a man whom he possessed some influence over.

"They set their night for action, and did act, but alas! though they got Incah free our captain is no more."

"Dead!"

She uttered the word in a tone that was most plaintive, and she dropped her face in her jewel-bedecked hands.

The man was silent, for he respected the grief he knew was sinking deep into the heart of his Queen.

"Is there no doubt, Campana?"

The question came after a long, long silence, and she quickly raised her head as the hope flashed upon her of a doubt of Incah's death.

"I have stood by his grave, Roma Leigh."

"Then there is no hope, not a ray."

"Not an atom of hope."

"He is dead."

Again a long silence followed, and the face was buried once more in her hands.

Thus she remained until minutes dragged away.

The man sat with bowed head watching her, and there was grief in his heart for her sorrow.

At last she raised her face.

Her eyes were dry, her look was calm.

About the mouth there quivered for an instant a look of pain, and then that passed away.

"Tell me all, Campana."

"I can bear it now."

She spoke in a voice that showed perfect command over herself.

"They, the master of Crag Eden, and his companion, planned well."

"They went to the jail by night, before a storm that was threatening broke, and in disguise gained entrance."

"The master of Crag Eden released Incah, I know, for his comrade was the one to suffer."

"The jailer was a powerful man, one of giant strength, and though surprised he made a good fight, for he wounded one of the men severely twice, and shot our poor Captain Incah."

"The jailer shot him?"

"So it must have been, Roma Leigh, for the comrade of Raynor Rickerly remained in the jail, supposed to be dead, and Incah and the planter left together."

"I saw them pass together, riding like the wind toward the river, where Raynor Rickerly had a boat in waiting for Incah."

"It may be that Incah deemed his wound slight, for he parted with the planter where the road forked, the latter going toward his home and our captain toward the river."

"But Incah's wound was mortal, for he was found the next day dead in the road, his horse bound to his body by the halter-rope."

"The jailer was found dead at his post, and the ally of the master of Crag Eden was lying in the jail-yard, severely wounded and unable to escape."

"His story I heard, and as no clew was visible to connect the master of Crag Eden with the affair, he took upon himself all blame."

"He said that he had intended to rescue the Gypsy, had entered the jail, secured the keys, set Incah free, but the keeper had fought him, and fired upon our captain, who had fled, believing him dead, for he was stunned and prostrate in the corridor of the jail."

"The rescuer was put in a cell, to be cured of his wound, that he might be hanged as the jailer's murderer, though he says Incah fired the fatal shot, and our captain's body was taken charge of by the master of Crag Eden, borne to our own burying-ground and laid to rest."

"And Raynor Rickerly did this?"

"Yes, Roma Leigh."

"And then?"

"He made the Romana symbols over the grave, and Incah was left in his last sleep."

"He did this—the master of Crag Eden?"

"Yes."

"And then?"

"The next day I met him on the roadside, and he called me."

"He asked me about my business, its profits, and if I would not rather make money in an easier way."

"I led him on, and he asked me if I had ever seen the Romana Gypsies, and I told him I had met them in wandering about and sold them goods."

"Then he told me he would make me a present of a good horse, saddle and bridle if I would pledge my word to deliver a package to Roma Leigh."

"To me?"

"Yes; and I gave him my pledge, and then closed up my business quickly to prepare to go, as I intended to start at once after you, as you ordered me to do."

"He gave me the horse and a liberal sum in gold, and this is the package, Roma Leigh."

The Queen took the package somewhat eagerly.

It was the letter which Raynor Rickerly had written in the Gypsy cipher.

She read it over slowly, and then said:

"Did you see what was taken from the body of Incah?"

"I did."

"Was there taken from the braids of his hair a paper?"

"No."

"You are sure?"

"Certain."

"You have done well, Campana; but after a rest of several days you are to return to the grave of Incah."

"You are to see if a box is there, and more, you are to dig up the body and discover if there are some papers braided in his hair."

"If they are not there you are to come at once here and tell me, bringing with you the box you may find in the grave."

"That is all, Campana, and you know the way we go, so as to follow us. You are also to tell me if the ally of Raynor Rickerly was hanged."

Campana bowed in silence and Roma Leigh was left alone to her own meditations.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE TRIAL.

LIKE a nightmare did the capture of Dick Surry rest upon the heart of the master of Crag Eden.

He had lived in fear at first that, to shield himself he would tell the truth as to who had slain the jailer, and had been the prime mover in the rescue of Incah, the Gypsy captain.

But days went by and no note of alarm was sounded.

He had seen the peddler about, and, little dreaming of his connection with the Gypsies, had dispatched him to find them and deliver to Roma Leigh the letter he had written her.

This was off of his mind therefore.

But the wounded hunter, who was soon to be tried for his life, was still before him.

Dick Surry was improving rapidly.

His wounds fully healed, his fever left him, and the doctors said he would soon be well enough to appear for trial.

He took his captivity with the utmost coolness.

If he suffered from his wounds, no murmur ever escaped him.

If he dreaded his fate he did not show it.

He calmly awaited the inevitable, whatever it should be.

That he felt that Raynor Rickerly was working for him there is no doubt, and so he bided his time.

If he escaped he would become a double fugitive, and must seek some other hiding-place, he well knew.

Raynor Rickerly had befriended him in the long ago, when he was ill, and he, in return, had tried to do his duty for that friend, who had known the secret he carried in his breast, and yet kept it from the world.

In that effort to save the Gypsy, to serve the master of Crag Eden, he had nearly lost his life, and wounded severely, he was a prisoner, accused of murder, his trial before him, beyond that the gallows.

He had given the planter no sign when he had visited him, that those present could understand that there was a secret between them.

Had he died from his wounds, Richard Surry, or Surry Richardson, as was his real name, would have uttered no murmur.

Born in refinement, educated, having held high position among his fellow-men, having loved with all the depth of his nature, and been met only with deceit in friendship, disaster and death by his hand of the one dearest to him, he was willing to find rest in the grave.

He had been forced into exile, and his life was simply an existence.

Should he die of his wounds therefore he was content.

Should he recover it was but to live a life of sorrow and remorse.

That Raynor Rickerly would let him die upon the gallows he had no fear.

He would save him from a death of ignominy without doubt, cost what it might.

So it was that Dick Surry did not worry about the future.

He took life as it came, day by day, recovered from his wounds, and was ready for trial when the time came.

A lawyer had undertaken his defense, and yet what defense had he?

He felt sure that Raynor Rickerly had employed the attorney.

So he had.

The day of trial had come round, and the court-house was crowded.

Raynor Rickerly and his son were there, but their seats were not in a conspicuous part of the room.

The prisoner was brought in, and his attorney admitted his attempt to free the Gypsy; but he denied the killing by the prisoner of the jailer.

The Gypsy had been the one who had fired that fatal shot, and in return had received his death-wound from the jailer.

He had used no weapons in his fight with the keeper of the jail, but had simply sought to overpower him.

He had fallen unconscious, and upon his regaining his senses the jailer was dead, the Gypsy was gone.

He had sought to escape, to thus hide the fact of who had been the rescuer of the Gypsy, but his wounds were too severe, he had been unable to get out of the gate, and so had been discovered by the old negress.

More he did not know. But then, there had been found no shot fired from the jailer's weapons.

This looked strange. The Gypsy certainly died from a gunshot wound.

It was decided that the bullet should be gotten from the body of the Gypsy.

A party was at once sent to the grave, and to their amazement they returned to report that the body had certainly been exhumed very lately, for there was every evidence of it, and perhaps but a few hours before.

But the bullet was found, and it did not fit the pistol of the jailer, nor did it fit the pistol of the hunter.

His weapon had its load in it, but it was thought that he had loaded it after killing the jailer.

Still, the bullet would not fit the jailer's pistol or his.

Then the body of the jailer was taken from its grave, and a search made for the bullet that had killed him.

It was found, and it was the counterpart of the one taken from the Gypsy's body.

It did not fit the pistol of the jailer, nor of the Gypsy, nor of the prisoner.

This was mysterious and pointed to the existence of another weapon that was not on hand, perhaps to another person on the scene.

But this the prisoner denied.

He had been alone, he said.

With this the case was turned over to the jury, and they decided very quickly that some one should be hanged, for the jailer had been murdered, the Gypsy slain, and the only one guilty, in their minds, was the mysterious man who had been hiding in their midst, as though a fugitive from justice.

That man was, of course, the Hermit Hunter, Dick Surry.

He heard the verdict of the jury unmoved, did not even glance toward Raynor Rickerly, and then arose and listened to his sentence.

That sentence was that he should be hanged on a day not far distant.

There was a strange smile upon his face as he sat down.

What that smile meant Raynor Rickerly knew, and when he left the court-house his face was more livid than that of the condemned man.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE REFUSAL.

THE night before the day appointed for the execution of Richard Surry, the Hermit Hunter, settled down with wind and rain.

In his cell the prisoner sat, pale, stern, yet calm.

He had waited as the days went by for the rescue he had a right to expect.

But it had not come.

He believed that Raynor Rickerly was working for his release, and yet the eve of death was at hand.

The planter had not come near him.

He had seen him pass the jail several times and glance toward his cell window, as though to give him hope; but there came no word, no act in his behalf.

Now, as he sat in his cell, with the shadows of night creeping about him, the jailer came and said there was a visitor to see him.

It must be Raynor Rickerly, of course.

But no; the one who entered was a young man.

He wore a heavy military cloak and slouch hat, while his breeches were stuck in cavalry-boots that came far up above his knees.

He hung up his wet cloak and hat, and took a seat near the prisoner, while the guard retired.

"I am Royal Rickerly, my man, and I have come to give you what consolation I can in this, your darkest hour of life."

"I thank you, sir; it will be but a short while now before I end all suffering."

"You come from your father, I suppose?"

"No, I do not, for he does not know even of my coming."

The hunter looked surprised.

"Your father did not send you here?"

"He did not."

"You came of your own free will?"

"I did."

"And why?"

"I will tell you."

"I should like to hear."

"The truth is, I attended your trial and was a close listener."

"My opinion is that you are no more guilty than I am of the charges against you."

"I grant that you came here to free the Gypsy, but you had some accomplice, and he did the work."

"Free from here you could find that man and punish him for deserting you to die for his crime."

"Now, to-morrow you are to be hanged if you stay here, and away from here you can clear yourself of the charge of murder."

"I have thought the matter over, and dis-

cussed it with others, and they all agree that they condemned you upon circumstantial evidence.

"I tried to get the governor to commute the sentence, but he refused.

"Somebody had to be hanged, and you were the only one upon whom they could at present fit a noose.

"So I determined to come and save you.

"The guard is half-blind and partially deaf, and we are the same size.

"Away from your cell the corridor is dimly lighted.

"With my boots, cloak and hat you can pass out with no suspicion that it is not me.

"My horse is in the shed outside, and by dawn you can be far away, your tracks covered up by the rain.

"Here is a purse for you, and in it you will find five hundred dollars, which, if you are ever able to do so, you can pay back to me."

"And you would remain here in my stead?" said the prisoner, with deep emotion.

"Why not?"

"Your father did not send you?"

"No."

"Is this honest?"

"It is; but you seem to feel that my father should have done so."

"Oh, no; only he was friendly to me once."

"Come, get ready and be off, for if you don't you'll hang."

"It will bring punishment upon you."

"A short imprisonment, perhaps, and people will say I had a Quixotic idea to free you; but that is all."

"I will not go."

"No?"

"I mean it."

"Sure?"

"I do."

"Then you are a most infernal fool."

"I will await my fate."

"It's hanging, man."

"I know it."

"No chance of reprieve."

"I believe you."

"No other chance of escape."

"That may be."

"I tell you, man, be sensible and go."

"I thank you from my heart, Mr. Rickerly, but I will not go."

The prisoner spoke with deep emotion, and Royal Rickerly looked puzzled at the firm manner he had refused his offer of escape.

"Reconsider, man."

"I will not take advantage of your kind offer, Mr. Rickerly."

"Well, give me a reason."

"In the first place, I would subject you to perhaps a year's imprisonment."

"Then I will accept my fate, unless I am set free by other than yourself."

"You are foolish to do so."

"I will abide by my decision; but I have a favor to ask."

"Certainly."

"Will you give a letter I have written to its address, *after I am dead*, if die I must."

"Willingly."

"Unopened?"

"Why, Surry, you do not think I would read your letter?"

"No, but I wished your pledge that you would deliver the letter unread to the one to whom it is addressed, *after I am dead*.

"If I do not die as condemned now, send the letter to an address I will now give you."

"I will pledge you my honor to do so."

"Here is the letter," and he took from a hiding-place a sealed envelope.

"Why, this is to my father?"

"Yes, upon a matter between us."

"He shall get it, under conditions named, or I will return it to you, as you direct."

"Here is the address to which you can send it, if I escape the gallows."

"All right."

"Now I have another favor to ask."

"Granted."

"Have you a pistol with you?"

"I have."

"Will you give it to me?"

"For what purpose?"

"Well, I will tell you."

"I do not fear death, Mr. Rickerly, but I do dread an ignominious taking-off."

"If, at the last moment, I see there is no hope, when they go to pinion my arms, I wish to send a bullet through my brain."

"Egad, you are right."

"What a soldier you would have made, Surry!"

"I was a soldier once; but never mind now, and give me the pistol."

Royal Rickerly took from an inner pocket a small, silver-mounted derringer pistol.

"This never misses fire, and there will be no mistake about it."

"Only point it away from the crowd, as it will go through and through your head."

"It is the weapon I wish, thank you."

"Pray secure it and keep it as a souvenir of one whom you have befriended, after the deed is done."

"I will."

"There is no name upon it?"

"No."

"I am glad, for as, strange to say, they did not search me, they will think I had it with me all the time."

"It is a bad night out, Mr. Rickerly?"

"Yes, horrid; but let me urge you once more to accept my offer."

"No, I will not."

"Then good-by, Surry, and Heaven bless you!" and the officer wrung the hand of the condemned man warmly, threw his cloak about him, drew his slouch hat down over his eyes and left the jail.

He passed out with but a word to the guard, and saw how readily the prisoner could have done the same.

Then he mounted his waiting horse and dashed away rapidly through the wind and rain.

CHAPTER XL.

A SILENT WITNESS.

ON the same night of rain and wind, when Royal Rickerly was visiting the condemned prisoner in his cell, the master of Crag Eden was pacing to and fro in his library.

His face was more stern than ever, and his hair seemed to have whitened much in the past few weeks.

The wind without caused him to shudder now and then, and at times he would pass his hand over his brow as though he suffered.

"To-morrow he must die, and I cannot save him."

"I have done all I could, without compromising myself, and yet nothing could be done."

"I wonder what he thinks?"

"I wonder if in the end he will confess?"

"Why, I will laugh at him if he does, and who will believe him?"

"I would help him if I could; but I cannot."

"Hark! how that wind howls."

"I hope it will not storm to-morrow night, and yet the silence will be terrible."

"Ah me! I have a heavy load to bear upon my conscience."

"Ha! there comes some one in all this storm."

"Can it be a message from him?"

"No, he has gone around to the stables, so it must be Royal, returning from Riverdale."

A few moments after Royal Rickerly entered the library.

He had cast aside his cloak, hat, and boots for dressing-gown and slippers.

"Well, my son, you had a rough ride of it to-night."

"Yes, father, I came from the village."

"In all this storm?"

"Yes, I went to see that poor wretch Surry."

The planter started.

"Why did you wish to see him?" he asked, but his voice quivered.

"As I have before said, father, I do not believe the man guilty."

"Nonsense!"

"No, it is the truth, and so I decided to try and save him."

"And did you?" almost shrieked the planter.

"Oh, no, for the stubborn fool refused to do as I wished."

"I rigged out so as to disguise myself as much as possible, and told him to put on my boots, hat and cloak, and his face, with the slouch pulled over his eyes, and the color, would never have been seen, and he could have walked out by the keeper as I did."

"But he refused."

"He certainly did."

"It would have gotten you into prison."

"A few months' imprisonment, perhaps; but I do not wish to see him die, for somehow I am sure he is innocent."

The planter shook his head.

"Then, if free, he could hunt down the other party who would see him die, for I am sure there was another man in that attempt at rescue."

Raynor Rickerly started and turned his face more from the light.

"What did the prisoner say?"

"Oh, he said that he would meet his fate, would not get me into trouble by leaving me to suffer, and the brave fellow will meet death without a tremor, though somehow I think he has a hope of rescue from some source."

"Impossible."

"Yet I think that he has hope, for he spoke in a way that led me to believe he did not think he had been wholly left to his horrible fate."

"I cannot understand how he can be saved now, my son."

"Nor I, as he threw away the chance I offered him."

Darius just then entered to announce supper, and Royal Rickerly ate with a great appetite; but his father scarcely tasted anything, yet drank considerably.

After supper they returned to the library, and Royal said:

"Father, Violet has set a day when she will become my wife."

"I am glad of that, my son."

"I received the acceptance of my resignation from the navy to-day, with a regret that it had

been tendered, and as the war is over now in Mexico, I can settle down to a life of ease."

"You certainly can, for you will be a very rich man, Royal, with your own fortune and that of Violet, for she is the heiress to half a million, at least."

"So the colonel told me; but now about Viewlands?"

"I have looked it all over, and it will have to be overhauled from cellar to garret."

"I will go up to Baltimore in a day or two and get workmen to begin on it, and the quarters shall be rebuilt, new fences put up, while the house shall be added to, improved and finished completely."

"It will take about three months for this, so when do you get married?"

"In just four months, sir."

"Then I shall have ample time for the work, and it will give me something to occupy my time out of the usual routine."

It was late when the father and son separated to go to their respective rooms.

The planter, however, could not sleep.

The wind howling around the house disturbed him, and the patter of rain upon the panes of glass made him nervous.

He felt remorse gnawing at his very soul.

It was the last night of Richard Surry on earth, and he had been too cowardly to make some bold effort to rescue a man from death and to die for his own deeds.

It was dawn when he dropped into a troubled slumber, and he was awakened by Darius, who told him breakfast was ready.

He had decided to go to the village to witness the execution, and so had told his son.

Royal had said that he would accompany him, and they would drive over in the family carriage.

The Crag Eden carriage was a grand affair, and was drawn by four spirited horses in magnificent harness.

Upon the box sat the negro coachman in livery, and behind stood two black footmen.

The villagers were always glad to see the Crag Eden carriage enter town; but on this day there was a greater curiosity on hand.

It was the hanging of Surry, the Hermit Hunter, and so the fine turn-out of the Rickerlys was not the first object of attention.

From far and wide came carriages, wagons and carts, all crowded.

Hundreds of gentlemen appeared on horseback, and half a thousand negroes had begged a holiday to "see de hangin'."

As it would serve as a moral to them, and aid to enforce the commandment, "Thou shalt do no murder," it was a permission that their masters readily granted, to let them witness the execution.

There was no thought of a reprieve, no chance of a commutation of the sentence to imprisonment for life.

A number of planters, feeling that the condemned man was really innocent, and was shielding the guilty one, had asked the governor to commute the sentence.

But governors are great bodies, and great bodies move slowly.

The request had doubtless been pigeon-holed and forgotten.

Toward the scene of execution went the crowd.

The carriage from Crag Eden was forced into a prominent position, though the master had not so wished it to be.

A strange fascination had caused him to go to the hanging.

He could not resist seeing the end of the man who had been so true to him.

He knew that Surry was to die for his friendship for him.

Would he die in silence?

Would he make a full confession?

One way or the other, Raynor Rickerly had not the strength to resist going to the scene of execution.

He found himself within fifty feet of the gallows, and directly in front.

He would have moved, but his carriage was blocked in and he could not get out.

There he was forced to remain.

He was as white-faced as though dead, and he looked like one who faced death in its worst form himself.

Royal was by his side, calm and unmoved outwardly.

He was the cynosure of many eyes, as a man who had seen strange scenes, a man who had been an actor in many a strange tragedy.

Presently the little procession from the jail came in sight.

There was a guard of six men, led by the sheriff.

Next came a clergyman, although the prisoner had refused his kind offices.

Then two deputy-sheriffs, walking on each side of a cart on which was a coffin.

On the coffin sat the prisoner.

Behind came a guard of four men.

The prisoner's face was pale, but not an atom of emotion did he show.

He wore his shroud and glanced about him in a manner as utterly indifferent as one could imagine.

He realized all, but was not the man to flinch.

He sprung from the coffin to the ground unaided, ascended the gallows without assistance, and faced the crowd.

The clergyman advanced, but he waved him back.

Then the deputies ascended to pinion his arms and legs and draw the black cap over his face.

The sheriff stood at his post.

The eyes of the prisoner swept over the crowd.

He seemed to be searching for some one.

Then they fell upon the carriage of Crag Eden, and next rested upon the face of Royal Rickerly.

Who understood the look that came into the eyes of the doomed man?

Who understood the strange smile?

Then the deputies stepped forward once more; but, as they did so, the right arm of the prisoner was raised, the hand withdrawn from his breast.

Next there follow a sharp report, and the Hermit Hunter was dead.

He had cheated the gallows.

He had taken his own life, and the silent witness in the carriage from Crag Eden had fainted.

Was it joy that the doomed man had not spoken?

Was it horror at his death?

Whatever the reason, the master of Crag Eden had fainted.

CHAPTER XLII.

FROM THE GRAVE.

It seemed strange to many that a strong man like the master of Crag Eden, should swoon at a hanging, when many of the weaker nerves stood the ordeal without flinching.

But many had said that the man's last glance was upon the face of Raynor Rickerly, and that might have accounted for it.

Then there had been no hanging.

It had been a suicide instead.

The derringer had done fatal work, for it had sent the bullet through the temples of Richard Surry, and the lead had then buried itself in the gallows-post at one side.

The deputies had been too amazed to catch the falling man, and he had fallen across his coffin at the foot of the gallows.

Of course there was a wild scene that followed.

If others had fainted, however, the fact that the master of Crag Eden had done so attracted the most attention.

"I will attend to the burial of that man."

"Keep his body until I send for it," had said Royal Rickerly, and then he turned to his father, who, under the care of Dr. Lovering, whose buggy had been fortunately near, was reviving.

"Did he confess?" was his first utterance.

"No."

"Did he die at once?"

"Instantly."

"Maybe he left some confession."

"Let his body be searched."

It was this that had sent Royal Rickerly to look after the body.

Nothing was found upon the body.

Then the young sailor drove to the jail in the doctor's buggy, while his father and the physician went to the inn.

Nothing was found in the cell lately occupied by the prisoner.

Royal Rickerly then gave orders that the body of the Hermit Hunter should be buried near his cabin, and thither it was sent.

The interest felt in the dead man by the sailor no one particularly noticed, or thought it worth while to investigate if they did.

After a stop of an hour the master of Crag Eden drove homeward.

He was accompanied by the doctor, for Royal Rickerly had gone in his buggy along with the wagon that bore the body of the suicide.

Arriving at home the master of Crag Eden rallied.

He braced himself with a drink of brandy, told the doctor that he could not account for his sudden swooning, and anxiously awaited the return of his son.

It was late in the afternoon when Royal Rickerly drove up.

The doctor's horse looked jaded, but was led away for rest and food.

"Nothing was found on the body?" eagerly asked Mr. Rickerly.

"Nothing, father."

"Nor in his cell?"

"Nothing."

"He made no confession?"

"Not a word, the jailer said, and he, the clergyman and the sheriff alone saw him."

"But to the clergyman?"

"He simply thanked him and declined his services."

"To the sheriff?"

"He did not even speak."

The planter looked relieved, and when they adjourned to dinner ate heartily and drank more.

After dinner the doctor took his departure, saying to Royal Rickerly, who went out to his buggy with him:

"I do not think your father is well, Royal."

"He was terribly upset to-day, and seems to show an unaccountable interest in that man's having left a confession."

"I can understand it, sir, for father has felt that Surry was innocent, and so hoped he would leave a confession to that effect, proving who was the guilty one."

"Ah, that is it?" and the doctor drove away.

"Are you going to Riverdale to-night, my son?" asked the planter, after the departure of the physician.

"I thought I should ride over, sir."

"Very well; but did you have poor Surry buried?"

"Yes, sir. I took the body to his old cabin, and had a grave dug under the tree where he always sat."

"The few things in the cabin shall be left as they are, and the unfortunate man will be at rest at last."

The lips of the planter quivered, and he made no reply.

But Royal Rickerly said:

"Father, what there was between you and that poor fellow, you know best."

"When I visited him in jail he got my pledge to give to you, if he should die, a package."

"If he did not die I was to send the package to a certain address."

"I will now hand you the paper, sir, and you doubtless are aware of its contents."

Not a word did Raynor Rickerly utter, but his hand trembled violently as he reached it forth for the package.

Turning upon his heel Royal Rickerly went to the stables, and was soon after riding toward Riverdale.

In the mean time Raynor Rickerly had entered the house.

Night was coming on, and he seemed to wish to be in the brightly lighted library.

He began to pace the room, as was his habit when deeply moved.

He had thrust the package into his breast-pocket with the seal unbroken.

For hours, with downcast head and hands behind his back, he walked up and down, up and down.

He never seemed to tire, and at last, only when the large clock in the hallway chimed midnight, did he seem to have made up his mind to some purpose.

Then he drew the package from his coat-pocket and glanced at it.

Next he seated himself in his easy-chair, and with the light falling over his shoulder broke the seal.

He then read slowly, resting his arms upon the chair to steady them, for his hands were trembling as though he had an ague.

What he read burned into his heart and brain, and no wonder, for it was as follows:

"IN PRISON, Thursday."

"Up to to-day I held hope of rescue."

"But now, when to-morrow is my execution day, I begin to despair."

"Do not misunderstand me, for it is not death I dread, for that would be welcome under other circumstances; but I despair of your aid, and fear that I must die on the gallows."

"You know my past, enough of it to be aware that I killed one who wronged me, and unintentionally took the life of her I loved."

"It was a crime, perhaps, and yet I meant it not."

"My sorrow for her death has been great, but for her death by my hand it has been a remorse untold, and so I have looked upon the grave as rest."

"You cared for me when ill, kept the secret I told you in my delirium, and I loved you as I would a brother."

"You came to me for aid, and I gave it you."

"Well, you know that I am not guilty of murder that night."

"I do not believe you deserted me until you thought me dead."

"Where you went, and who killed the Gypsy, I do not know, nor do I care."

"I do know that I found the jailer more than my match, where I had expected, with my great strength to master him readily while you aided the Gypsy to escape."

"When you returned I was unconscious."

"When I recovered consciousness, the jailer was dead by my side."

"You killed him, for the large bullet came from your pistol, and it was with the same kind of bullet that the Gypsy was killed, so that points to you as his murderer also."

"I know that you had some motive in wishing to free this Gypsy, and I believe you had a motive as well in wishing to get rid of him."

"That is with the past and your conscience."

"You killed the jailer and you have left me to hang for it."

"If you do not save me I die on the gallows."

"If I do thus die, I leave to you the full remorse of your act, and my curse be upon you, Raynor Rickerly."

"I am not one to commit you for revenge."

"I will die in silence, but out of the grave comes my voice to you, and waking, or sleeping, my spirit, murdered for your sake, will attend you."

"Hide from it you never can."

"SURRY RICHARDSON."

With a groan of anguish the stricken man tried to rise, but he fell back in his chair and consciousness left him.

Just at that moment Royal Rickerly entered

the library, having just returned from Riverdale.

He started, sprung forward, saw the letter, knew that his father slept, or had fainted, and then he hastily read all that was written.

As he finished it his father moved, and he ran to the door.

A moment after, Raynor Rickerly rallied, and when Royal again entered the room, his father stood by the mantle; but he had hidden the letter, and did not know that it had been seen by his son.

"I am not at all well to-night, my son, so call Darius to see me to my room," he said, and that night the master of Crag Eden slept while the faithful Darius watched by his bedside, a bright light in the room to keep off haunting spirits the darkness might make visible.

CHAPTER XLII.

WAS IT A BROKEN PLEDGE?

FAR from the scene of their last encampment, when Campana visited his Queen, to make known his work done as a spy, the wandering tribe of Gypsies had roamed, and we again find them in the far Southland, on the shores of the Mexican Gulf.

The Gypsy camp is a perfect one, and they seem to enjoy the balmy spring breezes from the Gulf.

Coming along the highway bordering the waters is a horseman, and he rides with the air of one who has come a long distance.

He is not dressed as a Gypsy, and yet his dark face and peculiar features show him to be one of that strange race of wanderers.

He is well mounted, and his horse does not show hard riding, for, being a Gypsy, he has exchanged his horses day after day as he came along on the trail of the Gypsies.

The man was Campana, the Gypsy spy.

He had gone back from the camp, where last seen, by order of his Queen, and once more entered upon his duty as a spy.

When he had made certain discoveries, he started again to find his Queen.

It was no easy task, but day by day, week by week, he followed the wanderers' track, until at last, after a long, long while, he had trailed them to the Gulf.

Suddenly before his eyes appeared the encampment, and the dark face of Campana lighted up with joy.

He was at the end of his long trail.

Swinging in a hammock made of grass, and stretched between two magnolias, was Roma Leigh, the Gypsy Queen.

Her people had prospered on their long march—they always do.

Wealth had steadily come into their coffers, and now they were recuperating themselves, repairing their wagons, painting up, and resting their animals for another long jaunt northward.

The beauty of Roma Leigh, if anything, had increased since the last time she was seen.

She lay in an indolent way, a cigarette between her white, even teeth, and watching the smoke curl upward as though she was building air-castles.

"Roma Leigh!"

She started at her name being called in a voice that seemed strange to her, and beheld Campana standing by her side.

"Campana!"

"Yes."

She had sprung from the hammock and grasped his hand.

"You have overtaken us at last, and I am glad, for I feared harm had befallen you."

"No, I am safe."

"Come, sit there on that log and tell me all, unless you will first rest, for you look worn out."

"I am tired, for the trail has been a long one; but I will rest better after I have told you all."

"Very well, what have you to say?"

"I returned to the vicinity of Crag Eden; but I dared not go as a man, so I wore the disguise of a woman, and claimed to be a Spanish lady seeking rest and health in the country."

"I stopped at the inn, was not suspected, and so gleaned all the information you wished."

"You saw the master of Crag Eden?"

"Many times."

"And his son?"

"Often."

"Well?"

"I had rooms that opened upon a garden, and had gotten my own horses, so at night I could leave without being seen, and in this way I went to the grave of Incah."

"Ah!"

"I opened the grave and found the box."

"And the papers braided in the hair?"

"Were not there."

"Were not there?"

"No."

"You are sure?"

"Perfectly."

The Queen smiled and Campana continued: "I took the contents of the box with me and threw it into the river."

"I have here all that Incah had with him."

"Except the papers braided into his hair?"

"Yes."

"And then?"

"I refilled the grave and reached my room at daylight.

"It was during the trial of the hunter for killing the jailer, that I told you of, when Incach escaped.

"I watched the case closely, and I am sure that the prisoner was not guilty.

"The bullet that killed the jailer was exactly like the one that killed Incach."

"Ah!"

"Exactly; and no weapon from which they could have been fired was found at the jail.

"I visited the prisoner, pretending to wish to aid him, but could learn nothing from him.

"His mouth was closely sealed as to the past.

"I stopped in my carriage one day near Crag Eden, claimed to be frightened, and asked to borrow a pistol to take home with me, promising to return it, giving as an excuse that I was reported to be rich and dreaded robbers.

"The master was away, but the servant loaned me a pair.

"They were his master's, he said, and from these were fired the bullets that killed the jailer and Incach, for I borrowed the bullets from the doctor, who had them and took them from the bodies, and they fitted perfectly."

"And the hunter?"

"He was found guilty of murder and sentenced to be hanged."

"And was?"

"No; for he blew his brains out upon the gallows."

"Ah!"

"No attempt to rescue him was made?"

"None."

"And the master of Crag Eden?"

"Fainted at the act of the suicide, for he was there in his carriage with his son."

"And then?"

"The younger Rickerly had the body taken to the cabin home of the hunter and buried."

"Well?"

"I know nothing else, other than that young Rickerly is to be married very soon."

"Ah! to whom?"

"Miss Burbank."

"And, from your discoveries, who do you think killed the jailer?"

"The master of Crag Eden."

"And the murderer of Incach—who is he?"

"It must be the master of Crag Eden."

"So I think."

"Now, Campana, you have done well, so go and rest, for I shall start on the track to Virginia to-morrow."

"There was a pledge, was there not, Roma Leigh?"

"There was a pledge, if Incach did not die."

"Incach is dead, and we return to Virginia," was the determined reply.

And the eyes of the beautiful Gypsy shone with a strange light as she uttered the words.

CHAPTER XLIII.

WEDDED.

RIVERDALE was ablaze with light.

It was the event of events in that beautiful home, for the only child of Colonel and Mrs. Burbank was to marry the heir of Crag Eden.

It was Violet's only love, and she had loved her lover from her early girlhood.

He had rescued her from the kidnappers and he had saved her from death, from being thrown over the cliff when she had gone to the rescue of the Queen of the Gypsies.

From the day she had seen the boy heir to Crag Eden she had loved him, and when he went away as a youth, her accepted lover, to become a hero, to win fame, she had fairly idolized him.

He had come back to her a man, and greatly changed; but her love remained unchanged.

And so the days of joy to Violet had gone on until the time came when she was to become a wife.

All preparations had been made for a grand wedding.

Raynor Rickerly had hinted that he would have liked a quiet wedding.

But Mrs. Burbank must have her way, and so extra cooks came into the Riverdale kitchen, additional help was gotten to make arrangements, and before very long the house was a vision of beauty.

The evening came around at last, and with the twilight hundreds of lanterns were lighted about the grounds, a band played in a pavilion, and scores of carriages rolled up to the doors.

The mansion seemed to be on fire with its blaze of lights, and no one had ever seen a grander affair than was the Riverdale wedding.

Soon a carriage rolled into the massive gateway.

There were four horses, a coachman and two grooms.

Within were two persons, the master of Crag Eden and the bridegroom.

They were met at the door by Colonel Burbank, and a moment after Royal Rickerly and Violet Burbank stood beneath a huge marriage-bell of flowers, while the clergyman performed the ceremony that was to unite them as man and wife.

The bride was exquisitely lovely, self-possessed, and repeated her answers in a firm voice.

The groom was as handsome as an Apollo, pale, yet firm.

Then followed the congratulations, and afterward the festivities of the evening, until midnight, when Royal Rickerly drove his wife to their new home of Viewlands.

The grand old place had been thoroughly fitted up and refurnished for their reception, and a lovelier abode bride could not wish.

The servants were in place to receive them, the mansion was brilliantly lit up to give them welcome, and Violet, who had never seen the interior of Viewlands was in an ecstasy of delight.

And back to his home drove the master of Crag Eden.

He no longer had his son to cheer his desolate life, that is as a dweller beneath the same roof with himself.

Of late the master of Crag Eden had grown more moody.

He was wont to spend his nights in reading, retiring to rest only when the dawn broke, and then sleeping until after noon.

A breakfast at one, dinner at seven and supper at midnight were the hours for his meals.

A drive after his late breakfast, a horseback ride or a walk were his only exercise, and he seemed content.

He never went far from his home, saw no one but Colonel Burbank and his family, if visitors called, and was going back into his old life as a recluse.

At his son's wedding he had been urbane to all, and Royal had wondered at his coming out of his reserve, for he had not expected it.

But after the wedding he returned within himself, as soon as he had made one call upon the young couple in their new home.

After that not even to Royal was he at home, always pleading some excuse from seeing any one.

Thus the weeks passed by until one spring morning Raynor Rickerly arose as was his wont, at noon, and dressing leisurely, looked from his window out upon the valley and river.

He gave a cry and started back, clutching a chair as though to prevent his falling.

What he saw was the Gypsy encampment.

Under cover of the night they had again come to their old camp-ground.

"She has broken her pledge," he muttered.

"Great God! what does her coming back mean?"

He finished dressing, merely nibbled at his breakfast, and that day did not go out as was his custom.

When he retired to bed that night it was dawn, and he slept from sheer fatigue.

Thus the days passed away.

No messenger came from the Gypsy camp, as he had feared, and he gained hope.

But he did not leave the mansion, any more than to stroll in the flower-gardens.

He had given up his drives, rides and walks.

Darius and Black Pink shook their heads knowingly.

"The master was failing, that was certain," said Darius.

The doctor was sent for by the faithful servants, but the master would not see him.

"I am not sick, I am perfectly well," he said.

But the Gypsies still camped in the neighborhood.

By a strange coincidence, they were not trading and selling horses about the country, but kept close to their camp, going out only to hunt and fish.

Their Queen had not been seen, and whether she was with them or not, none of the negroes on the Crag Eden plantation could tell.

About the country drove Royal Rickerly and his bride, returning calls, and seeming to be perfectly happy in their newly-married life.

Before long Violet gave up going to Crag Eden, for she never saw her hermit father-in-law, and from his daily visits at first, Royal soon came down to a ride over each Sunday to his father's home.

If he saw his father it appeared to him to be an accident, and yet the planter gave no excuse for his strange behavior other than to say that he wished to be alone.

One day Royal Rickerly was returning from a hunt, and his way home led by the cliff where he had first met Roma Leigh.

To his surprise he saw a woman suddenly appear upon the cliff, and glancing downward she shouted in an unknown tongue to some one below him.

Then from behind a rock before him a man sprang to his feet, rifle in hand, and sped away like a deer.

The man was in the Gypsy costume, and the thought flashed upon Royal Rickerly that, but for the sudden appearance of the woman he would have ridden upon an ambush, would have gotten a bullet-wound in his heart.

He glanced upward, but the woman had disappeared.

The man also was out of sight in the thicket.

The man he had recognized by his dress to be a Gypsy, and the woman he knew was none other than Roma Leigh.

Dismounting quickly he ran up the path leading to the cliff, determined to find the Gypsy Queen and know if she had indeed saved his life.

CHAPTER XLIV.

WHAT ROMA LEIGH SAW.

SEVERAL nights before the scene at the cliff, Viewlands had been entered and robbed of a few articles of little value, the burglar being frightened off before he secured anything in the way of jewels, money or silver plate.

Partially seen in the darkness, the robber had been set down by Royal Rickerly as one of his own slaves, or one from an adjoining place, and the affair had not been thought of more.

But returning from the village one day, Royal Rickerly had come upon a Gypsy going along the road on foot.

He was an evil-faced fellow, and as it was raining slightly, wore a coat that the young planter at once recognized as his own, and which had been stolen by the burglar at Viewlands.

"Where did you get that coat, my man?" he asked.

"Bought it," was the sullen reply.

"Where?"

"In the city."

"When?"

"Weeks ago."

Now, there was no doubt as to the coat, for it was an odd one and valuable, being perfectly waterproof, and Royal Rickerly felt that he had the thief before him.

He first decided to take the man back to jail, but did not care to be troubled by a trial, so said:

"That is my coat, and I wish you to give it up."

"No."

"I do not care much for it, but as you are decided to keep the coat, I'll give you a hint not again to come to my home to rob."

With this Royal Rickerly raised his stout riding-whip and began to thrash the Gypsy severely.

The man drew a knife, but his hand was seized in a grip he could not shake off, and the whipping was continued until the Gypsy howled with pain.

Then Royal Rickerly threw him from him and rode complacently upon his way.

The Gypsy stood like a statue in bronze for some time looking after his chastiser.

Then he uttered a yell of wild rage and started off like a deer through the woods.

That night Roma Leigh had a call from one of her brown-faced subjects.

"Well, Lucah?"

"I am here, Queen, to ask consent to punish a foe."

"Who is he?"

"He has cruelly wronged me."

"One of our people?"

"No," said the man, reluctantly.

"Who is he?"

"One of the home dwellers in the land."

"In this neighborhood?"

"Yes, Queen."

"How has he wronged you?"

"He has whipped me as he would a dog."

"Where was your courage, your strength?"

"I was as a child in his hands."

"Then he must indeed be a strong man."

"But why did he strike you?"

"He accused me of stealing his coat."

"It is strange, Lucah, that you, of all my people, should be so often accused of theft."

"I am never guilty."

"It is well for you that you are not so found to be."

"Our people are cunning in trade, we live from the money we make by dwellers in the land, but we are not thieves, Lucah."

"I am no thief."

"Where did you see him?"

"In the highway."

"You know my commands not to leave this camp?"

"My horse strayed, and I went to pick him up."

"And he struck you?"

"Yes. See here," and he bared his broad shoulders.

"He has an iron arm to strike such blows."

"Who is he?"

"The master of Crag Eden's son."

"Ah! the sailor."

"One of our people, who went for milk for a sick child to Crag Eden, said that the mansion of Viewlands had been robbed, for the slaves were talking of it."

"And you had this man's coat?"

"I bought it from a black."

"Why did you not give it up?"

"He asked me for it, and followed with a blow."

"Will you say I can revenge the blow, Queen?"

"No, for you were wrong."

"Go!"

The Gypsy bowed and left the tent.

But, though the Queen did not grant him a permit to avenge himself according to the laws

of his people, he determined to take the matter in his own hands.

By night he secretly went to Viewlands, hoping to get a chance to see Royal Rickerly and kill him.

But the opportunity did not offer.

One day he saw the man he hated pass across the ford on horseback.

He was in huntsman's costume and carried his shotgun.

The Gypsy watched the way he went and knew that he could come back only one way.

That way was through the defile that led by the Haunted Cliff.

It would doubtless be late in the afternoon before the hunter returned.

But he must be on the watch, and so he got his rifle, slipped out of camp and made his way to the neighborhood of the Haunted Cliff.

He did not see that some one was watching him.

That one was Roma Leigh.

She had gone to the cliff and was leaving it when she saw Lucah approaching.

Instantly she drew back into concealment.

The man had no right to leave the camp after her orders.

Then why was he there?

She saw him glance about him and then seek a hiding-place among a group of rocks that had fallen from the cliff.

He could certainly be there for but one purpose, and that purpose was murder.

Roma Leigh knew not who the victim might be, but she suspected.

Lucah was one of the black sheep in her flock.

He had been detected in many acts of petty meanness, and had been suspected of worse, yet nothing had ever been really proven upon him. She had felt that Royal Rickerly would not have thrashed the Gypsy had he not found him with his coat on, and that Lucah had bought it from a negro she had her doubt about.

The fact was Lucah was in very bad odor in camp, and once an act of theft could be proven upon him his punishment would be a most severe one by Gypsy law, and their justice was as grim as death itself.

So Roma Leigh decided to await developments.

A couple of hours passed, and, patient as a panther Lucah kept his place of ambush.

Patient as was he, was Roma Leigh.

At last a horseman appeared in sight.

"It is he!"

This is what Roma Leigh said, as she recognized the man to whom she owed her life.

Lucah saw him also and got ready for his deadly work.

He glanced about him uneasily, then thrust his rifle upon a rock and waited.

Then it was, when Royal Rickerly was almost under fire, that Roma Leigh sprang to her feet, shouted to the intended assassin and saved the life of the man to whom she owed her own.

CHAPTER XLV.

WHAT ROYAL RICKERLY SAW.

WHEN Royal Rickerly dashed up the steep path leading to the cliff, he confidently expected to find there the Gypsy Queen.

But he was disappointed.

She had disappeared, seemingly in a very mysterious way, for she had not passed him on the way.

Still she might have hidden behind some rock, while he passed and then continued on her way. He looked down into the defile, but nowhere was she visible.

He looked all over the cliff, and yet could not find her.

This made it very evident that she did not wish to see him, that she had in fact, avoided him most surely.

So down the path he made his way to where he had left his horse.

But the animal was gone.

He had merely thrown the rein over a stump, and the horse had gotten away.

He naturally expected that the animal would go home, and was starting along on foot, when he beheld him in some meadow-land back the way he had come.

He at once started toward him.

The horse seemed to be enjoying the grass about him, but moved off in time to avoid his master.

He bolted away just before him.

Royal Rickerly followed.

He hoped that the dragging rein would catch in some object and check his horse.

But he went for a mile or more, and the sun was setting, and his horse still kept a hundred feet ahead of him.

He kept on until dark, and then decided to turn back.

Angry he certainly was, with his horse and with himself.

He was three miles from the cliff, and he had not been further than that from Crag Eden, where he could have gotten a fresh mount.

The horse would doubtless take the long way home, and arriving before him give his wife an alarm about his safety.

Back as he had come Royal Rickerly wended his way.

He walked briskly, but night had settled before he started upon his return, and he did not reach the vicinity of the cliff for over an hour.

As he drew near, he stopped suddenly, for he saw flashing lights ahead.

Who could be there? Was the place indeed haunted?

He moved on cautiously.

The lights were in motion, and there were thirteen of them.

He was now under the shadow of the cliff, and with in sixty feet of the graves of the three assassins, and where also were the graves of the other two who had given weird legends to the Haunted Cliff.

He saw the lights drawing nearer, and so shrunk out of sight among the pile of rocks where a few hours before Lucah had hidden to fire upon him.

From his hiding-place he saw the lights advancing.

They were all of a red hue, and seemed to be borne above the heads of people who were walking slowly along.

As they drew nearer, he saw that there were fourteen dark forms, for one carried no light, and walked in the midst of the others.

All were robed in black, excepting that one, and their faces were also covered so as to be completely hidden.

The one not clothed in black was robed in red.

His face was uncovered, and the lights flashing upon him revealed to Royal Rickerly one whom he had before seen.

He crouched down and waited.

What did this strange scene mean?

The party halted at the graves, and then one starting off counted off one hundred steps.

He had uttered no word, but seemed to step as though he counted each one.

Royal Rickerly counted one hundred.

Then the others silently followed him.

It brought them to a spot not very far from where Royal Rickerly was hiding and under a group of large pines.

Then the pine straw was swept up in a heap at one place, the group formed in a circle around it, excepting three men, and there began to dig with spades taken from beneath their long black gowns.

The third man was placed by himself in the center of the circle.

There was not a word spoken, only the dull blows of the spades as they sunk into the earth.

As the ground was taken up, it was placed upon clothes put down to receive it.

At last the work was finished, and it seemed an age to Royal Rickerly that they had been there at their dismal task.

Then for the first time a word was spoken, and that which was said distinctly reached the ears of the young planter in his place of concealment.

A voice, deep and solemn, said:

"Degenerate son of our wandering race, you know why we are here, why this grave has been dug.

"Our people's law is inviolate, and you broke our laws.

"You have become a thief, and for it you should have lost a hand.

"But you disobeyed our Queen, and over your life she holds full power.

"You raised your rifle to kill one whom she forbade you to seek revenge against.

"Your sentence for the crimes, and they are many that we have traced against you, is death.

"You know the death that you must die.

"A degenerate Gypsy, you cannot find a resting place among the dead of our people.

"Our law is to seek the grave of some evil one, step off from that grave one hundred steps in any direction, and there make a resting-place for the one who is doomed.

"When you are in your grave, then it is to be smoothed over, hidden from human eye and lost to all remembrance by our people.

"Yonder are the graves of evil men, for they sought to kill our Queen.

"Here is your grave, just one hundred steps from theirs.

"It is narrow, very narrow, just your length, and deep enough for the earth above to hold you in its embrace.

"Here is the potion that you are to drink.

"It will bring unconsciousness, and you will die beneath the earth.

"Lucah, degenerate son of our wandering race, drink your death-potion, and to you, in the name of our people, I bid farewell."

Royal Rickerly was as motionless as the rocks among which he crouched.

He was dazed with horror; every word uttered had reached his ears.

He saw the line of dark forms open in a semi-circle around the open grave.

He saw one man standing at the foot of it, and holding a goblet.

The other, the one in red, stood upright, facing him.

Then he bowed, turned in silence and sprang down into the open grave.

Again he turned and held forth his hand.

It was for the goblet, and it was handed to

him by the one who seemed to be his chief judge and executioner as well.

Slowly to his lips the man in red carried the goblet, and without a word he quaffed it to the dregs.

Then he dashed it out upon the loose earth and disappeared from sight down into the earthen walls of his last resting-place.

The man who had spoken then stepped forward and glanced down into the grave.

What he saw, Royal Rickerly could only guess; but he seemed satisfied and waved his hand.

Two men stepped forward, seized the spades and began to throw in the earth.

It was an appalling sight to the young planter, and he covered his face with his hands.

When he again looked, the black-robed forms were taking up the loose earth left over and spreading the fine straw over the unmarked grave, as though to hide it forever from the eye of man.

This done, they marched away in solemn silence, extinguishing their lights as they left the spot.

It was clear starlight, and Royal Rickerly saw them disappear in the gloom up the valley.

Then he stepped from his hiding-place.

For a long time he stood still, as though undecided.

Then he started, as the neigh of a horse fell upon his ears.

"It is my horse, and he is returning.

"The rascal has doubtless caught his rein and is held fast."

So saying, Royal Rickerly walked down the defile.

He soon came to where his horse stood, the rein, as he had surmised, caught on the stump of a tree.

He released him, mounted and rode homeward.

But he took the long way around.

He did not care to go through the valley that led by the Haunted Cliff.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE DOUBLE PLOT.

WHEN Royal Rickerly arrived home it was after midnight.

He found his wife most anxious about him, for servants had been dispatched to Crag Eden and Riverdale to see if he was there when night came on and he had not returned.

He simply said that his horse had gotten away from him and gave him a long chase on foot.

He seemed tired out, his face was pale, and after supper went to bed.

He did not sleep well, tired as he was, for several times that midnight burial he had witnessed came back to him in nightmare.

He awoke unrefreshed, and Violet feared that he was going to be ill.

But he mounted his horse soon after breakfast, and went off for another hunt, he said.

He went by Crag Eden, stopped Darius from announcing his presence, and went straight to his father's room.

Entering when his father bade him do so in answer to his knock, he saw that his coming was unwelcome.

Raynor Rickerly frowned and bit his lips.

He had thought it was old Darius.

But Royal Rickerly did not notice his manner and said, pleasantly:

"Good-morning, father.

"How are you, for you keep so close we never get a chance to see you."

"It is my choice, Royal; but I am well."

"I see that the Gypsies are still here, father."

He saw the start that his father gave.

"Yes; but what of them?"

"Oh, nothing, only they are a most remarkable people, are they not?"

"Yes."

"You know a great deal about them, sir, so I wish you would tell me something of their customs."

"Who said that I knew anything about them?"

"No one, but for thirty years I know they have camped on your lands."

"They are their own lands, for they bought them."

"Well, sir, they have been so often here you must know much of their customs, so I wish you would tell me something about them."

"Why?"

"How do they bury their dead?"

"At sunset always."

"With ceremonies?"

"If a child, each one throws a wild flower in the grave; but if a grown person a leaf is thrown in."

"Whom do they bury outside of their cemeteries?"

"Those whom they know to have broken their laws."

"Where do they bury such, father?"

"Anywhere, everywhere; but why this sudden interest in the Gypsies, my son?"

"It is not sudden, sir, for I have been interested in them ever since my poor brother Royal was stolen by them."

"Who said that they took him?" asked the planter quickly.

"I heard you say so when I was a boy," was the answer and it looked like an evasive one.

The planter was silent and Royal asked:

"Whom do they bury by night, away from their burying-grounds, and by torchlight?"

"Royal, you have seen some such burial?"

"Yes, father."

"When?"

"Last night."

"Where?"

"Under the shadow of the Haunted Cliff."

"Tell me all you know."

This the young man did, his father listening with the deepest attention to all that he said.

"My son, long years ago, before you were born I was thrown much with these Romana Gypsies and learned a great deal about them."

"I dread them, for they are an evil people, and I would give much to keep them away from this part of the country."

"I feel under a shadow while they are here."

"They have buried that man alive, and if you could find other than yourself to swear that they witnessed that burial, they can be driven from this part of the country."

"But, father, I—"

"Listen to me, my son."

"Those people are a blot upon the earth and should be gotten rid of."

"They have, as I said, committed murder last night, for that drug given to the poor wretch who was doomed, was simply to prevent his struggles."

"He was conscious of all the horror of his situation, and thus died."

"Now there are hunters about the mountains, poor men whom a few hundreds in gold, or much more if need be, would be a God-send to them."

"They could be drilled to tell what you saw, as though they saw it."

"They could go to the town to make their statement, pretending to have been sleeping in camp by the cliff, when aroused by the Gypsies' coming."

"If they were to make a charge the Gypsies would be arrested, and all of their great men, or judges, thirteen in number, would be sent to the gallows or to prison."

"This would keep them forever away from this country, and we would be freed of their infernal presence."

"Will you do this, Royal, and thus take this blot off of our fair land?"

Royal Rickerly listened most attentively to his father until he had finished.

Then he said:

"Why should I not make the charge against them?"

"No! no! no! you would not live a month after it."

"They would kill you, my son."

"And these men you wish me to bribe to swear falsely?"

"How mean you?"

"What about them?"

"What is the difference, for they must take care of themselves."

"I fear, father, we must keep the secret I discovered last night, and try some other way to get rid of these people."

"There is no other way."

"Then we will have to endure their presence."

"It will kill me."

"Why should it?"

The planter shook his head and said no more. His son would not act, so he went.

He was sorry that he had suggested it to Royal, as he had refused to do his bidding.

But he knew the situation, could find the spot, from his son's description, where the poor wretch had been buried.

If the body was exhumed, the lungs, examined by experts, would show that the man had been buried alive, and the drug found in the stomach would also be proof.

If Royal could find two hunters who would swear to having witnessed the scene he had, then he, Raynor Rickerly, could find the men.

He knew where several such men lived, barely making an existence.

He could seek them out, tell them all that he had seen, drill them in just what to say, and pay them handsomely, telling them that he did not care to appear in court, as an excuse for his not making the charge against the Gypsies.

With a handsome sum offered, the hunters would be glad enough to swear as he wished, especially as they hated the Gypsies and wished to get rid of them, for they often hunted on their grounds to their, the hunters', detriment.

So ran the thoughts of the old planter, and then they took another turn.

"I can," he mused, while Royal stood at the window gazing down upon the distant Gypsy camp.

"I can start the case against them, and have it as only rumor, and then go to their camp and warn them."

"Would this not make them forgive me, for I am sure they hold the death of Incah against me, by their returning here."

"They have come for proof, and then will take my life."

"If I warned them they would fly, and never dare return, while they would forgive me, I am sure."

"I will do it."

Then Royal turned from the window, and he was surprised at the change in his father.

He had not seen such a pleasant expression upon his face in many a long day.

"Your visit has positively cheered me, my son."

"Come again," said the old man.

The young man mused as he rode away from Crag Eden:

"I believe father intends to do what he wished me to do."

"He is as deep as the sea, and the change that came over him proved that he had decided upon some plan."

"I will visit the Gypsy camp and place that pretty Queen upon her guard in return for her saving my life, for verily do I believe the man buried last night was the one who lay in ambush yesterday to kill me."

So saying, Royal Rickerly started for the camp of the Gypsies.

CHAPTER XLVII.

GYPSY JUSTICE.

WHEN Roma Leigh, the Queen of the Gypsies, warned Royal Rickerly of danger by calling out to his intended assassin, she was not sure who the man was that lay in ambush.

He was in the Gypsy dress, but he had kept his hat pulled down over his eyes so that she could not fully recognize him.

Still she had a suspicion as to the truth.

Why she had not called to him before his victim appeared, she did not know.

Impulse had kept her from doing so.

She had spoken in the Gypsy tongue when she had given the warning, and the man, with a cry of terror had fled.

He did not stop in his flight until he had gained the confines of the camp, sneaked into his tent unseen, and then lying down had feigned sickness.

He was thoroughly alarmed, for he knew his fate if known.

He had hoped that he had not been recognized, in fact felt sure of it.

If he could only keep his secret some other might suffer in his stead.

The fact was Lucah was a dyed-in-the-wool villain.

He was not even square to his own people, and was the blackest of black sheep.

He groaned until several passers came in, and he told them how ill he was.

He had the Gypsy doctor sent for and was given some medicine to take, but he did not take it.

In the mean time Roma Leigh having saved the life of Royal Rickerly knew that he had recognized her.

This was what she wished, as she desired that he should know to whom it was that he owed his life.

But she did not wish to be seen, so, as she saw that he was coming up the cliff, she climbed upon the top of the arbor and sat there.

She saw him hunting for her, and once he was near enough for her to touch with the wand she carried.

But she allowed him to go his way without seeing her.

She did not see that his horse got loose and he followed him, for she supposed that he had gone on up the glen toward home.

Hastening to her own camp she at once called the judges together.

These were thirteen in number, and they were known as the Wise Men of the tribe.

In case of the death of a Queen, these men had the power to appoint another, for the Gypsies were not ruled by a King, their leader being known only as their Captain.

These thirteen men also had the carrying out of the laws of the tribe, and they never flinched in doing so, as has been seen.

To call them together for counsel, Roma Leigh sent her wand to each one of them.

Then they came in their black robes, knowing there was work for them to do.

They took their seats in the Justice Tent, and soon Roma Leigh came in, clad in black.

"I have sent for you, mighty rulers, to say that one of our people is false to his race."

"Send for Lucah to appear before you."

The chief judge bowed and spoke to two of his comrades, who arose and departed.

Soon they returned to report that Lucah was very ill.

"Bring him!"

It was all that the Queen said; but the order was obeyed.

Soon Lucah was brought into the august presence of the judges and his Queen.

He looked ill indeed, and had his head and throat bound up as though very ill.

"Remove the bandage from that man's neck and see if a yellow kerchief is not beneath it."

The order of Roma Leigh was obeyed, and beneath was the yellow kerchief.

"See if there is another man among our people who now wears a yellow neckerchief."

It took some little time to make this discovery, but the report was made that not one in camp then had on a yellow neck-scarf.

"Lucah, confess."

"I do confess, Roma Leigh," was the low response.

"You left camp against my order?"

"Yes."

"You went to the Haunted Cliff?"

"Yes."

"You lay in ambush to take a human life?"

"I did."

The judges fairly started at this confession.

"Had you killed that man we would have been driven out of this country, perhaps many of us would have been slain, for his death would have been avenged, and all would have been upon your head."

"He struck me," said Lucah, as though to excuse himself.

"Judges, the man is before you for trial, and I am ready to give my testimony."

"Then you can hear his confession, after which his fate is in your hands," and Roma Leigh turned to the judges.

The chief judge bowed and said:

"I would ask, Queen Roma Leigh, for your charge against this man, Lucah, our unfortunate brother."

"Theft, deceit, lying to me, disobedience to my order, and last, an attempt to kill, and then to shield himself by feigned sickness that a fellow might be suspected and suffer in his stead."

"The first charge, Queen Roma Leigh?"

"He entered a plantation home and robbed it, was found with a stolen coat on, and the lash was laid upon him by the owner."

"This I sought proof of and found."

"The second charge?"

"He has deceived me often, and others of his people; he has told falsehoods, and disobeyed my command that he should not leave this camp."

"And last?"

"He left camp, went to the Haunted Cliff, lay in the path of the one who had whipped him for stealing, when he might have sent him to prison, and was going to fire upon him from his hiding-place when I, who had watched him, called out and he fled."

"I leave him to you, judges."

"Does our Queen speak what you know to be true, Lucah?" asked the judge, as Roma Leigh left the Tent of Justice.

"The Queen speaks the truth," came the low reply, in a voice that the culprit in vain tried to keep from quivering.

"As a Gypsy, Lucah, you know your fate?"

"I do."

"In two hours we will call for you."

"Be ready, for your doom is sealed."

"Go!"

The doomed man bent low before his judges.

He uttered no word of pleading, for well he knew how useless it would be.

He said no word to excuse himself, for the fiat had gone forth against him.

He was a Gypsy and he bowed in perfect, abject submission to his fate, and that fate he knew but too well.

With no guard to watch him he went forth from the Tent of Justice as though he was a free man.

He sought his own tent and looked about him in a sad kind of way.

It was growing dark, so he lighted a lamp that hung over his head.

Then he sat down by his chest and began to take things out, mark names on certain articles to whom he left them, and then place all back again neatly in their places.

The things in his tent were likewise marked, and a belt heavy with gold was taken off and placed upon his bed.

Upon this was written:

"For the Strong Box."

This meant that his money went into the common treasury of the Gypsies.

Having thus arranged his belongings, he took a seat to await the inevitable.

Condemned as he was for crime, he could bid no one farewell, not even those nearest to him in kindred ties.

Thus he waited, and what his thoughts were who can tell?

If he had been evil in life, he certainly was going out of it a brave man.

Whatever his sins, cowardice was not one of them.

Soon after the judges came.

They were in their long black robes, their faces hidden, and they carried their unlit lamps in their hands.

One of them handed to Lucah the red robe.

It was the shroud of a doomed man.

He put it on in silence, put a taper to his lamp and held it for each man to light his torch from.

Then he put out his lamp and left his tent in darkness.

In another moment he was in the midst of his executioners walking away to his death.

The Gypsies stood in silence watching the somber, weird procession as it wound silently out of camp.

When, two hours after, it returned with unlit torches, the red-robed form was not in their midst.

CHAPTER XLVIII. THE SECOND MEETING.

WHEN Royal Rickerly rode away from Crag Eden, after his long talk with his father, he directed his way toward the ford of the river, crossed, and turned up the highway leading to the Gypsy camp.

On the side of the river where the Gypsies were encamped the country was very wild, almost a wilderness, in truth.

The estate of the Rickerlys took in many acres on that side, as well as across the river where were the homes of Crag Eden and Viewlands.

Even on the side where were these places, plantations were far apart, and on the oppositeshore habitations were very few and far between.

There were valleys, mountains and forests that only the hunter or the traveler passing through the country trod.

So it was that few ever went near the Haunted Cliff, and far fewer cared to go there.

The road that led to the Gypsy camp was well enough for a horseman, but rough for a vehicle; but Royal Rickerly was mounted, so rode along at a canter.

He had determined to see Roma Leigh, and to do this intended to ask to have his fortune told by her.

He recalled the wandering Queen as she appeared that day at the cliff, and he felt a longing to see her again, and he meant to do so.

She had saved his life the day before, and he wished to prove his appreciation of it by a visit to her.

So up to the Gypsy guard he rode and asked politely to see Roma Leigh.

The Gypsies knew him as the man who had saved the life of their Queen.

What it was between themselves and his father they kept to themselves, and he was received with marked deference.

Word was sent to the Queen that the heir to Crag Eden desired to see her and have his fortune told.

The messenger returned with the information that the Queen could not be seen, that the planter must call again.

Away he rode, wondering why he could not be seen then.

He took the path to the cliff.

He wished to see the spot where the unfortunate Gypsy had been buried the night before.

He rode along until he came near the spot, dismounted and hitched his horse.

Without much difficulty he found the grave, though so neatly had it been covered over that, but for having seen its position he would never have suspected its being there.

Not a vestige of loose earth had been left, and the pine straw had been put back to look the same as did the rest of the hillside.

But with his feet he marked the spot where the ground was soft, and he knew that beneath, only a few feet, rested the body of a human being who had died in mortal agony that was fearful.

Up the ridge-path then he went, and going toward the cliff suddenly confronted Roma Leigh in the arbor.

She had heard his approach too late to fly, and could but face him.

He politely raised his hat, and as he bowed low, as he might have done to England's queen, he said pleasantly:

"We meet again, fair Roma Leigh."

"It is an honor I had not expected here."

"Yes, we meet again, sir," she said somewhat coldly.

"I had called at your camp, but was told that I could not see you then."

"I did not take it that you were absent, so rode hither, intending to stop upon my return."

"And why?"

The abrupt question almost startled him.

"To see you."

"For what purpose?"

"To have my fortune told."

"Your fortune is made."

"How do you mean?"

"You are married."

"Ah! does that settle a man's fate forever and aye?" he asked with a smile.

"What else would you have?"

"I do not understand."

"Do you wish to get free, does your marriage vow already fret you?"

"Did it do so, would I tell of it?"

"Who knows?"

"Then I have no future other than the everyday existence of married life and that of a planter?"

"Let me see your hand."

He led her to the seat in the arbor and sat near her.

Then he held forth his hand.

She looked at it for a long while in silence, and then she gazed steadily into his face.

He fairly colored under her look, and he was glad when she broke the silence.

"Your life will not be as calm as you may think, for there are scenes in the future which

you must pass through, and pain, sorrow and some joy must follow."

"Anything else, fair Roma Leigh?"

"What more would you wish?"

"Anything that you can tell me."

"I can say no more."

"Then I will, for I wished to see you that I might thank you for saving my life yesterday."

"Saving your life?"

"Yes; don't plead ignorance, for I saw you, and recognized you, as there can be no other woman like you."

"I lost you afterward, for you hid from me."

"But I was riding upon an ambush set for me by one of your Gypsy subjects whom I severely thrashed some days ago for stealing from me."

"He wished to wipe out the scars of my whip, so sought to kill me, and to you I owe my life, my beautiful Queen."

"It is nothing."

"My life is nothing? Now, there you are mistaken, for it is to me a great deal and I do not hold it lightly."

"This beautiful world is too full of pleasures for me to wish to give them up at the crack of a Gypsy's rifle."

"You regard it as a debt you owe me?"

"I do."

"Then it is canceled, for I owe to you my life."

"Don't mention it."

"Yet it remains that you saved me from death."

"Granted, and let one debt cancel the other, if so you will; but we must be friends."

"Friends?" and there was a sneer in her tone.

"Yes; why not?"

"No."

"Can a Gypsy have only a Gypsy for a friend?"

"Yes."

"That is sad for me; but were you not a little severe on the poor devil last night?"

She started and asked, quickly:

"What do you mean?"

"You Gypsies punish crime severely, do you not?"

"We have our own laws."

"I have heard so, and more, that they are as cruel as death."

"You refer to some Gypsy law executed?"

"Well, yes; there was one of your people called out of life last night."

"How know you this?" and the face of Roma Leigh blushed.

"I saw it, that was all, for my horse escaped me, I went after him, and when I came back there was a very weird kind of execution going on in yonder pines."

"I wanted to fight for the poor fellow, upon the principle of helping the under dog in the fight, but the thirteen black demons were too many for me, so I wisely laid low and held my peace."

"You were wise; but having seen this what then?"

"I have not the remotest thought of betraying it, I assure you, though it was very rough on the poor wretch."

Roma Leigh grasped him by the arm and said hoarsely:

"I have a hold on your life, for I saved it, and the man you saw die was the one who would have killed you."

"Swear to me not to betray by word or action what you saw, and your life is safe."

"Will you swear?"

"A threat would never force me to it, Roma Leigh, but I will swear as you wish."

"And I will vow not to make known to my people what you saw."

"Did I do so, I will now tell you, as you have sworn as I wished, no person on earth could save you from death."

As she spoke she rose and paced to and fro as an enraged tigress might have done, and Royal Rickerly, wholly unmoved to all appearances, quietly gazed upon her.

CHAPTER XLIX. FRIENDS.

THE look which Royal Rickerly bent upon the Gypsy Queen, as she walked to and fro upon the cliff, was full of admiration.

When he first had seen her, the day of the struggle on the cliff, he had admired her beauty of face and form.

Now he had a chance to see how perfect that beauty was.

Her form was exquisite in shape, and set off by the dress of barbaric splendor that she wore.

Her feet were tiny and shapely, her waist small, and her head was poised with a certain haughtiness becoming in one who was a queen, even if she was ruler of a wild, wandering people.

She had a king's ransom in jewels upon her neck, arms and fingers, and her costume was rich in the extreme.

Then her face was the perfection of feminine comeliness.

Every feature was marked with strength and

passion, and yet they were cut in an exquisite mold.

So it was that the young planter gazed at her and drank in her loveliness.

Suddenly she turned upon him, and her dark face crimsoned as she met his earnest eyes.

"As you have sworn to keep secret what you saw, I will tell you now that we can be friends, Gypsy though I be."

She held forth her hand and he warmly grasped it.

Then bending quickly he kissed it.

The hand trembled and she withdrew it quickly, yet she did not appear to be angry.

"Come, Queen Roma, as we are friends, sit by me here, for I wish to have a talk with you."

She seemed to wish to refuse, but yielded and took the seat by him on the rustic bench.

"What do you wish to ask me?"

"What is my father to you?"

She started and remained silent.

"Will you not answer me?"

"Why would you know?"

"I know that there is some bond between you, whether it be of fear, hatred or friendship, such bond surely exists."

"Suppose I tell you that it is of hatred?"

"I can believe you."

"You have long been away from home?"

"Yes, in the navy of my country."

"Does your father ever speak of us, we hated Gypsies, I mean?"

"Seldom, and only when something of importance brings you up."

"You knew that one of our people was tried at your village and sentenced to be hanged, but escaped and was shot?"

"Oh, yes."

"Do you know who killed him?"

"It was said that the jailer shot him as he came out, but the facts of the case were never clearly proven at the trial."

She had her eyes upon his face, but he did not show a sign that he knew from another source more than the trial had brought forth.

She looked disappointed, as though she had hoped to get some clew from the young planter as to the real cause of Incab's death.

In many cunning questions plied to the young planter did Roma Leigh try to find out that which she was in the dark about; but he was too guarded to betray himself, and she came to the conclusion that he knew nothing whatever about the past life of his father, as far as the Gypsies were concerned.

He, too, endeavored to entrap the Gypsy Queen into some unguarded remark as to his father's real position with her, and her people, but here he also failed.

Thus an hour passed, and at last he arose to depart.

"We are to meet again?" he said.

"Why?"

"Because I wish to see you again."

"Are we not friends?"

"Yes."

"Then may I not come here again?"

"You are your own master."

"But to meet you here?"

"This is your own land, is it not?"

"My father's."

"It is said that ill-fortune hangs about this place."

"I cannot believe it so."

"I nearly lost my life here, as did also the lady who has become your wife."

"True, but yet you were both saved, and that was good fortune."

"And you nearly lost your life here, too."

"Granted, but you saved me, and that is the best of my fortune."

"You do not fear to come here, then?"

"I do not."

"Will you bring your wife?"

His face flushed; but he responded:

"No, for the place has unhappy memories for her."

"You may come—sometimes," she naively said.

"To meet you?"

"I will be here."

"You do not dread the spot?"

"Why should I?"

"Its memories, its graves, yes, the presence of that unmarked grave yonder in the pines."

"I do not fear the dead; nor have I dread of the living."

"You are a brave little woman."

"Good-by."

He again grasped her hand, and she walked away down the path to the glen.

He watched her until she was out of sight, and then he, too, descended the hill to where his horse awaited him.

Mounting, he rode down the glen to the open valley and thence around the mountain homeward.

That day he reached Viewlands with no game, and Violet wondered, for he was a dead shot.

But he told her of his visit to his father, and how they had had a long talk together.

But he did not tell Violet the subject of their conversation, nor that he had also seen Roma, the Gypsy Queen.

"What's the use?" was the question he asked himself.

CHAPTER L.

THE TWO HUNTERS.

THE second day after his meeting with Roma Leigh, Royal Rickerly rode over to Crag Eden to see his father.

Darius at first said that his master was asleep, and he dared not disturb him; but after awhile he called Royal aside in a mysterious way, and said:

"Massa Roy, I goin' ter tell yer de truf, sah, but yer mustn't let on whar yer got it."

"No, Darius."

"Wa-al, sah, I toles yer, 'cause I don't like jist ther way ole massa are behavin'."

"How do you mean, Darius?"

"The truf is, sah, ole massa hain't here."

"What?"

"No, sah, he hab gone away."

"Gone where?"

"Dat I don't know, sah; but arter remainin at home so long, he call me up last night, hab his horse saddled, some pervisions cooked, an' just rode off about daylight."

"Did he say where he was going?"

"No, sah."

"Nor when he would return?"

"About to-morrow night, sah."

"Which road did he take?"

"To the mountains, sah."

"He went armed?"

"Deed he did, sah, he carry his rifle and pistols, too."

"Very well, Darius, I guess he has only gone on a hunt in the mountains; but I'll not let on that I knew that he was away."

"By the way, did he take his dog Nig with him?"

"No, sah."

"Well, call Nig, and make a long rope fast to him, for I will take him with me this morning on a little hunt."

"Yas, sah; but if yer lets him go he'll run on the hunt for ole massa."

"So I thought; but, Darius, I wish you to go over to Viewlands, and tell my wife I may not return home to-night, as I shall go into the mountains after deer."

"Massa am de deer you is goin' arter, Mars' Roy," said Darius, with a chuckle.

"To tell the truth, Darius, I do think it best to look up my father; but if I find him I'll have it appear as an accident."

"Now tell Black Pink to get me a haversack of food to take with me, and then go over to Viewlands with my message."

"Yas, sah," and as Darius rode away toward Viewlands, Royal Rickerly went in the opposite direction toward the mountains, and ahead of his horse was the dog, Nig, a huge black bearhound, that was evidently following the trail of his master, Raynor Rickerly, who had gone along that way some hours before.

The truth was that the master of Crag Eden, as Darius had said, had gone to the mountains.

Instead, however, of being a "little off in the head," as the old butler had hinted, he was going with a very firm determination to carry out a plot he had formed, and which will soon be made known.

Up in the mountains, scattered here and there, were the homes of a few hardy hunters.

They were a wild set, in their way, lived by hunting and trapping, and were content on a very small income.

Half a dozen times a year, maybe, they went to the towns and villages to sell their pelts, and to buy their stores, and they knew little more of life than what they then learned.

One of these mountaineers dwelt on a spur that gave him a good view of the surrounding country, with valley and plain spread out before him.

He was seated in front of his humble cabin one afternoon, entertaining a fellow-hunter who had "dropped up" to see him from the valley below.

He had gotten out, in honor of the occasion, a black bottle and pipes, and the two were enjoying themselves while discussing their late luck or lack of luck in hunting, as the case might be.

"Game are not seen so frequent now, Pard Pete, as it were before them durned Gypsy men come about, fer they kills jist ter kill," said Jack Dawson to his guest, Pete Moore.

"No, them Gyps is a bad lot, and I wishes they was all hanged, for they hain't no use on ther hull creation, nohow," was the reply.

But Jack Dawson had hardly heard his friend's remark, for his eyes were far down in the valley.

"Are it a b'ar, Jack?"

"No, it are a man on a horse."

"Maybe a Gyp, for they is camped down near Crag Eden Plantation."

"No, it hain't no Gyp, and none wouldn't come up here alone, fer fear he might git lost, and I ruther guesses he w'd."

"It are a white man."

Now this was an imputation on the part of Jack Dawson that Gypsies were not white, but in fact the mountaineers had not learned just how to class them as regarded their race, and that is a question that has puzzled wiser heads than those simple hunters.

"What are he comin' here fer?"

"If it were a party on 'em, with dogs and niggers, I'd know mighty quick they were a huntin' crowd comin' up ter skeer all ther game out o' ther mount'ins, then buy what we had and go back and claim they kilt it."

"That's so, Jack, fer I sell one your city chap, about a year ago, a b'ar, a deer and a wildcat, and he paid me prime fer 'em, too, and tuk 'em ter camp and swore he kilt 'em."

"He did fer true, right afore me, and they set him down as a mighty hunter, while I hed been paid ter lie silent, so said nothin' onless he tarned ter me ter prove his falsifyin', and I proved it, too, at a dollar a lie; but thet man are comin' on your trail up the mount'in, Jack."

He are so, and I'll soon know what he are comin' up here fer."

The two hunters continued to watch the stranger until he had ridden into a forest which hid him from view.

But he was on a trail that brought him directly up the mountain toward Jack Dawson's cabin, and half an hour after he appeared upon the spur coming toward them.

"It are the master o' Crag Eden, sure as shootin'," cried Jack Dawson.

"It are, sart'inly," Pete Moore replied, and soon after Raynor Rickerly rode up.

He appeared more cordial than was his wont; but he had always been a good friend to the hunters, so they greeted him kindly.

"Whar is yer people, sah?" asked Jack.

"I came alone."

"Then yer wants ter hev a still hunt with us?"

"I came up to put you on a hunt, Jack, and I am glad to find Pete Moore with you, for I was going to suggest that you get him to help you."

"We're in for it, Mr. Rickerly, if it pays."

"It will pay you big money, in fact, more than you can make in ten years up here at your hunting," was the earnest reply.

And the two mountaineers fairly whooped with delight.

They should have had Roma Leigh, the Gypsy fortune-teller to tell them what was before them.

CHAPTER LI.

THE HAVESDROPPER.

WHEN Royal Rickerly went into the mountains on the track of his father, he had with him a good trailer in Nig, the only pet the master of Crag Eden seemed ever to have had.

There was no difficulty in following Raynor Rickerly, for the dog had caught the scent and was patted that he could not dash swiftly along to overtake his master.

Royal Rickerly was certain that he knew just why his father had gone up into the mountains. He knew that he feared the Gypsies; what he had read of Dick Surry's letter, what he had seen and heard proved this, and since they had returned to the neighborhood the master of Crag Eden had not left his home.

Having told Raynor Rickerly of that midnight burial of the Gypsies, the son felt that he must keep him from doing harm, for he knew that he had placed in his hand a dangerous weapon against Roma Leigh and her people.

True, it was a weapon which his father would not dare use himself; but he had already asked him, Royal, to make use of it through the mountain-men, and thus frighten the Gypsies forever from that part of the country.

The pledge of Royal Rickerly to Roma Leigh, to keep the secret, had been given after he had told his father; but he had not expected him to use it.

But, having told him, he must not allow him to take advantage of it, as he surely meant to do by his trip to the mountains.

He did not wish to overtake his father, did not, in fact, wish to be seen by him; but he did desire to discover if his surmise was correct—that he had gone there to bribe men to bring charges of murder against the Gypsy judges.

So it was that he followed on Raynor Rickerly's track, and held on his way at a pace that he knew would bring him in sight of him before nightfall.

At a ridge that obtained a look of a wide valley, the dog gave a yelp, and there, miles ahead, he saw a horseman.

It was his father, and he watched him closely until he saw him turn up a mountain road that led to a cabin situated upon a spur.

"That cabin is his destination; but I dare not press on until dark, for he would see me in the valley, did he look back."

So saying, Royal Rickerly halted to rest, and when the mists began to float over the valley, he once more pressed on.

It is astonishing how hospitable one can become to a guest who brings good news or fortune.

So it was with Jack Dawson and Pete Moore, who at once set to work to make the master of Crag Eden comfortable.

True, they would have welcomed him anyhow, but they were now more than anxious to do their best to entertain.

"We'll not talk biz now, Mr. Rickerly, fer you an' yer hoss is both tuckered out from a long ride."

"Pete, you look arter ther hoss, and I'll stir up ther pervision, and you bet we'll have a good supper."

So, while Raynor Rickerly went to the brook to refresh himself by a bath, the two mountaineers set to work to prepare supper.

The choicest bits of venison were sliced off, some potatoes roasted, hoe-cakes baked and coffee made, and it certainly was a good supper for a hungry man, and Raynor Rickerly ate with more relish than he would have done at his own sumptuously spread table with every delicacy before him.

Night had fallen before the supper was set upon the table, and with a bright fire burning on the cabin hearth, the three men made themselves comfortable after the meal, smoking cigars which the planter had brought with him.

"Now, planter, name yer biz," said Jack Dawson, who, like his comrade, was a man accepting the situation he found himself in simply because he had been born to it.

If they had thus far done no great wrong, it was because no temptation had been put in their way.

They were wild fellows, hating law and ready for any act that suited their fancy.

They were the kind of men of which dangerous material is made if the chance offers.

This Raynor Rickerly knew, and aware that they could scarcely lay up over a hundred or two dollars a year, he knew that they would be glad to make a clean thousand at a game that simply involved a little tough lying, while their conscience would suffer but little if the death of a few Gypsies followed.

Now Raynor Rickerly did not wish that the Gypsies should escape free.

He meant to give them warning of danger, to cause them to believe him to be their friend; but this warning would be too late to save them, he was determined upon, and once their judges were held for murder, the Romana Gypsies would never dare venture again into Virginia.

So had Raynor Rickerly argued, and thus he meant to act.

When supper was over he began his explanation for coming to the mountains.

"My friends, I'll tell you what I wish you to do."

"I could do all I ask of you, only I do not care to appear before the courts, and it might be said I acted from revengeful motives because my son was stolen long years ago by Gypsies, for it is against these people I wish you to bring charges."

"We're more than willin', but what can be said ag'in 'em that goes in law?"

"I'll tell you."

"You know that they have strange, outlandish customs, and one of these is to bury alive one of their number who sins against the tribe."

"Now this is murder, and the thirteen men who call themselves Gypsy judges, are murderers when they so kill a man, for they do so against the laws of the State."

"Now there has just been an execution, or murder of this kind in the Gypsy camp, and I will give you the full particulars, the spot where the body is to be found, and tell you just what was done, so that you can say that you were on your way to the village, had camped for the night and saw it all."

"You will have to go to the magistrate and make your report under oath—"

"That won't hurt us none."

"No, for you will be doing the State a service in getting rid of these murderers, and frightening the rest of their people away from here forever."

"Good!"

"Now here is a map of the exact locality of the murder, and here are the explanations which you are to study."

"I will tell you all that was said and done, so that you can rehearse it, and go through with it."

"Now you are to start to-morrow for the Haunted Cliff, camp there, so as to show your camp, find this unmarked grave, and go on the next day to the village."

"I will meet you there, and tell you when you are to make your charge."

"You can say, if asked, that you went on to the mountains, after witnessing the murder, but thinking it over, you decided to return and tell what you had seen."

"Do you understand?"

"Sure," said Dawson.

"Well, now I will tell you just what you must swear that you saw on the night in question."

Then Raynor Rickerly told of the appalling rites of the midnight execution of Lucan, and going over it again and again he got his hearers skilled in the lies which they were to tell as to all they beheld.

"Now, here is five hundred for each of you, and when the Gypsies are caught you shall have as much more."

Jack Dawson gave a yell of delight that Pete Moore echoed, for never had they made money so easily before.

The yells startled a man outside who was standing against the cabin, gazing in at a crevice in the logs.

Every word uttered had been distinctly heard by him, and feeling that he knew all he cared for, and that he might be discovered, he walked swiftly away.

Half a mile from the cabin he came upon a horse and dog tied in the thicket, and both animals were muzzled to prevent a neigh or bark.

Mounting his horse and leading the dog the man rode away in the direction of the lower country.

It is needless to say that the horseman was Royal Rickerly.

CHAPTER LII.

THE DOUBLE WARNING.

"You see that I have come again—are you angry?"

The question was addressed to Roma Leigh, and the speaker was Royal Rickerly.

The Gypsy Queen was in the arbor on the cliff, and again she had her brushes and portfolio with her.

Her easel was in place, but somehow she had not gotten to work.

Was it that she expected some one?

Perhaps, for her eyes were instantly turned up the glen.

She saw a horseman approaching, yet went on with her work, and started when he approached and addressed her as though she had not known of his presence.

"No, I am not angry, but we must not meet too often," she said.

He threw himself upon the rustic seat where long years before his father had sat and talked love to the Gypsy Queen.

Then he said:

"I come on business to-day."

"Business?"

"Yes."

"To have your fortune told again?" she asked, with a smile.

"Ah, no, but to give you a warning."

"A warning?"

"Yes, of danger to you and to your people."

Her face slightly paled, but she answered firmly:

"I thank you; tell me of the danger."

He bowed his head a moment, as though thinking just how to begin.

It was a delicate thing he had to do and not compromise his father.

"Well, I took a hunt up in the mountains yesterday, and at night I came across a cabin, the home of a mountaineer.

"I did not make my presence known, for there were men within, and they were discussing a matter that deeply interested me, on your account."

"On my account?"

"Yes, for they had decided to make a charge against you and your judges, upon a matter they could swear that they knew all about.

"They were to start for the village the next day—to-day—and camp here to-night, so that they would be sure of what they charged.

"To-morrow they were to go on to the village and tell how several nights before they had, on their way to town, camped on the cliff here, and had seen strange sights in the glen below.

"In fact they were to swear how they had returned to their home, and talking over the matter had decided it was but right that they should report to the magistrate the whole affair."

"And those men were camped on this cliff and saw all?" said Roma Leigh deeply moved.

"So they will take oath, and you know the result, for whatever your own laws may be, in the sight of Virginia law they, your judges, committed murder, and you may be sure they will push the case against you to the full extent."

"I will at once put my people on the march," and Roma Leigh's face showed her alarm.

"No, hear what I have to say."

"I will."

"To more fully understand the situation those two mountaineers are to camp here to-night and go over the scene, as they will swear that they witnessed it.

"Then, to-morrow, they will go on to the village, and I think the next day your arrest will follow, so you have time."

"Time to fly, yes, and—"

"No, you misunderstand me, for I said the two mountaineers will camp here to-night."

"Ah! I see that you think it best that no report shall be made?"

"That is for you to decide, Roma Leigh."

"I simply give you the facts, and you can act as you deem best.

"If those men were kidnapped in fact, they could make no report."

"True."

Royal Rickerly and Roma Leigh understood each other.

The man had told his story, given his warning, and in no way compromised his father.

The story had been told in a way that the Gypsy Queen believed that the two mountaineers had really witnessed the midnight burial of Lucab.

With this Royal Rickerly let the matter rest, and soon after took his departure.

He was very tired, for all the day before and

the night past he had been in the saddle on his trip to the mountains.

He had retired to Crag Eden, left the dog, had breakfast, mounted a fresh horse and gone to the cliff to meet Roma Leigh.

Then he went back by Crag Eden, but his father had not returned, Darius said.

"Do not worry about him, Darius, for he will be along this afternoon."

"Only do not tell him I went to the mountains, but say I called yesterday and to-day."

With this Royal Rickerly rode on to his elegant home.

Violet met him at the door, but there were tears in her beautiful eyes and a look upon her face that no young wife could wear if she was perfectly happy.

"Did you have a successful hunt in the mountains, Royal, for Darius delivered your message?"

"Yes: I found my game."

"What did you kill, and where is it?"

"I killed nothing, but simply found my game."

"Is not lunch ready, for I am hungry and very tired?"

"I will lie down for the rest of the afternoon."

"Royal!"

"Well?"

"There was a mountain hunter here half an hour ago with a deer to sell."

"I did not buy it, for I told him you were in the mountains hunting, and he told me that he saw you as he passed up the Haunted Cliff glen."

"He saw me?"

And the face of the young man crimsoned.

"Yes; he said you did not appear to be hunting, as you were seated on a log talking to Roma Leigh, the Gypsy Queen."

"Curse the fool! what of that?"

"Only that I thought you were in the mountains."

And Violet turned away, her eyes full of tears, her heart aching with a dread of evil to come.

Royal Rickerly went in to his lunch, ate in silence, and then threw himself upon his bed to rest.

Late in the afternoon Violet went in to awaken him for dinner, and as she bent over him she started back as though a serpent had stung her, for from the lips of her husband came the murmured name:

"Roma Leigh!"

Thus was Violet warned to dread the future.

CHAPTER LIII.

THE SNARERS SNARED.

JACK DAWSON and Pete Moore were jubilant over the scheme they had to carry out.

They each had a cool five hundred in money in their inside pockets, with a promise of as much more when their plot should be successfully maneuvered.

The planter had spent the night in their cabin, and, contrary to his custom, he had slept well.

After breakfast he started upon his return home, having again rehearsed his hirelings in the parts they were to play and found them perfect.

"The Gypsies will avoid Virginia as a pest-house in future," the planter said with a confident smile as he rode homeward.

It was late in the afternoon when he reached Crag Eden, and when told by Darius that his son had twice called he said nothing.

As night drew on he grew nervous, for he knew that his allies must be on the ground studying the situation.

And he was right.

They were there.

They had shouldered their rifles, strapped on their haversacks and started for the village soon after the departure of Raynor Rickerly from the cabin.

They never rode, but preferred to walk, so kept no horses.

In fact, horseback hunting would be useless in those mountains.

They walked well, too, and the sun was yet above the horizon when they cautiously approached the Haunted Cliff.

They soon pitched upon a camp, and gave the appearance to it of having been used before as a camping-place.

Then they studied their map, took in the situation and pitched their minds about where the grave should be.

Jack Dawson went there to see and was not long in tracing out with his feet the long, narrow space of soft earth that marked the grave.

"It are snugly hid," he muttered.

Then Pete Moore came, and he, too, felt the hidden grave.

They stepped off the space from the graves of the assassins, went over their lines together to get them perfect, and had the whole situation in a nutshell when darkness fell upon the scene.

The mountaineers were superstitious, and their minds were haunted by the legends of the spot.

Alone neither of them would have gone there. Together they screwed up their courage to remain all night.

"I only hopes no ghosts won't walk ter-night," said Pete Moore, as he wrapped himself in his blanket to go to sleep.

"I hopes so, on my life I does, Pard Pete."

"Ef they does walk, we runs, you bet," assured Jack Dawson, and he, too, lay down to rest.

They did not at once get to sleep however.

They were too nervous about their surroundings.

But at last Pete began to snore gently, as though afraid of disturbing the ghosts, and soon after Jack followed suit.

Both of the men awoke with a start.

They thought they were dreaming at first, but soon came to realize that it was by no means a dream.

Their camp was completely surrounded by black-robed forms.

They sat up, rubbed their eyes, and beheld rifles thrust into their faces.

They were fearfully scared, but were not left long in doubt.

"Come!"

The voice that uttered the words was sepulchral in its tones.

They arose, and their traps were given them to strap on their backs, while their rifles and arms were withheld.

Down the hillside into the trail through the island the black-robed forms went with their prisoners.

They carried no lights, and there were thirteen of them.

Jack Dawson and Pete Moore were frightened 'most out of their wits.

Only the one word had been spoken.

These were the men against whom they had intended to inform, to swear that they had seen them bury a man alive.

The idea that Raynor Rickerly had deceived them never entered their heads.

Seeing the black-robed forms as they now did, and having gone over the scene of the midnight burial as they had, they almost convinced themselves that they had really witnessed what they intended to swear that they had.

The moon was up now, and this told them that it was nearly dawn.

Arriving in the trail the black-robed forms came to a halt.

Then they stood their two prisoners thirty paces apart, and handed to them their rifles.

"You are to kill each other," said the leader of the sable forms.

"What?" gasped Jack Dawson.

"Kill each other?" groaned Pete Moore.

"I have said it."

"Oh, Lord!"

"Ditto," said Pete.

"You are thirty paces apart, and you are to fire when I give the word."

"You are to aim to kill, for should you wound each other only slightly, then you will be buried alive."

"If you refuse to fire upon each other and kill, then we will bury you alive."

"You have your choice, so which will it be?"

Words could not have been spoken in more solemn tones than those addressed to the two hunters.

Their faces were livid in the moonlight, and they trembled as with a chill.

They looked at each other with an expression of horror and then turned their appalled gaze upon the black-robed forms about them.

The thought flashed into the mind of Jack Dawson to fire upon his captors when he would be given his rifle, and then try to escape; but this hope was crushed by his seeing the men completely surround them, and all but one held a rifle.

Then, too, if taken they would be buried alive.

Again the leader of the black forms told them what they were to do.

"I hand you your rifles now, and I will give the word to fire in just five minutes."

"Remember the alternative if you refuse and if you wound each other."

"You are to be buried alive!"

The hunters were not cowards, but this sudden facing of death unnerved them.

Was it possible that this fearful threat was to be carried out?

The men about them were silent and patient.

Then the leader handed to them their rifles and stepped to one side at an equal distance between them.

The moon, though on the wane, shone brightly and revealed the scene in appalling distinctness.

"I can't do it," groaned Pete Moore.

"Very well; you will have to die as I have said."

"Seize him, men, and dig his grave!"

"I'll do it!" yelled Pete, in terror.

"Then calm yourselves and be ready for the word."

"Be men; die like brave men, for death can come but once!"

This philosophical view of the leader seemed to cheer the two wretches.

Then, each had a hope that all this was done to scare them.

"Ready!"

They raised their rifles, and then followed:

"Aim—fire!"

The rifles cracked together.

But vain the hope of each man that it was done only to frighten them.

They fell at the crack of their weapons, Pete Moore shot through the heart and Jack Dawson with a bullet in his brain.

Death had been so sudden that neither had realized it.

"Hold! do not touch them."

"Leave them as they are, and you, Banta, go to Crag Eden as soon as it is dawn and report to the master that you were out hunting at day-break, saw two men in the Haunted Cliff defile quarreling and then step off and fight a duel, and you came to report the affair."

The man Banta bowed and moved away, and the others followed, reaching the Gypsy camp just as dawn broke.

And the two unfortunate hunters were left lying where they had fallen, victims of the Gypsy judges, to cover up their tracks in the midnight burial of the man their laws had sentenced to be placed alive in his grave.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE DISCOVERY.

THE master of Crag Eden had not been very long in bed when he was disturbed by Darius.

If he had slept in the cabin of the mountaineer the night before, he found it impossible to do so in his own home, so, as had long been his way, he passed the hours of darkness in his brilliantly-lighted library.

The hunters were often in his mind, and as he retired to rest just before dawn, he left word that he was to have his breakfast ready at ten, for he wished to ride over to the village.

Darius was surprised, but said nothing, except to Black Pink.

But before eight o'clock a man appeared at the mansion and demanded to see the master.

He was a Gypsy, and said that he wished to report what he had seen.

So the master was awakened.

"A Gypsy, you say, Darius?" and the master of Crag Eden turned pale as he uttered the words.

"He said not what he had to tell?"

"No, sah, only that he had seen somethin' he wished to report to you."

"I'll see him."

In fact the planter dared not refuse.

He must know the worst.

So he dressed and went out upon the piazza; but he armed himself before doing so.

It was Banta, the Gypsy selected to tell the story of the hunter's death.

"Well, my man, what do you want?"

"I am a Gypsy, sir, and was hunting in the valley, when I saw two men with rifles appear some few hundred yards from me and seem to be quarreling."

"It was just after daybreak, and they stepped off from each other some thirty paces, raised their rifles and fired together."

"Both fell, and I ran here to tell you, sir, what had happened."

The planter turned his face away to hide what he felt, for he was sure that the two men could be none other than his hirelings.

"How were they dressed?"

"Like mountain hunters, sir."

"Were they killed?"

"I dared not go to see, sir, but came to you."

"I will return with you as soon as my son comes, and I will send word to the village to the constable."

Men on horseback were at once dispatched to Viewlands and Riverdale for Royal Rickerly and Colonel Burbank, and another to the village with a note to the constable.

By the time he had breakfasted Mr. Rickerly saw his son ride up at a gallop, and as they were ready to depart Colonel Burbank arrived.

The story of Banta was repeated, and the party started for the scene, the Gypsy having been given a horse to ride to hasten them along.

Arriving upon the scene they found the situation to appear just as the Gypsy had reported it.

The two hunters were dead, one with his rifle still in his grasp, the other with the weapon lying by his side.

Their position, their weapons and all showed that it must be as the Gypsy had said.

Royal Rickerly understood all.

He was not deceived in the slightest.

He had warned Roma Leigh, and the Gypsies had planned and executed well.

He had expected that the men would be kidnapped and perhaps released long after with gold enough given them to keep them quiet.

The Gypsies wished no mistake.

They had silenced their would-be informers with lead, not gold.

He could not but admire the able manner in which Roma Leigh or her judges had managed the whole affair.

He glanced at his father and wondered what was in his mind.

Then the thought flashed upon him that perhaps the hunters had confessed the part played by Raynor Rickerly in the plot.

But the Gypsy did not appear to know more

than he had reported, and his going to Crag Eden, the nearest house, to report the affair was the most natural thing for him to do.

But Raynor Rickerly, in spite of his calm face was in a fever of fear.

He did not suspect the trick of the Gypsies, of course; but it squelched completely his plot to get rid of them.

All the work must be done over.

Then, too, they doubtless had upon them the map and directions he had given them.

Again he had put on paper what should not have been done by a man in his position.

He must search those bodies before the constable and coroner came.

So far, they had not been touched by any one.

Now he sent the Gypsy off to see if they had encamped near there during the night, and he asked Colonel Burbank and Royal to ride up to the Gypsy camp, to make inquiries about Banta.

"You surely do not suspect the Gypsy, father, in the face of such facts as are before us?"

"No, Royal, but it is well enough to know when he left camp, and all about him."

Royal remembered the papers, and saw his father's object, so called to Colonel Burbank to accompany him.

"Lead our horses to the river to water, Homer," said the planter to the negro who had accompanied them.

The black obeyed, and bending quickly over the body of Jack Dawson, the planter eagerly searched for the telltale map and directions.

But they were not there, though his money was.

Then the body of Pete Moore was searched, but with a like result:

The planter turned pale, for why should the men have torn them up?

He walked all about, saw the Gypsy, who said he had found their camp, and he searched about it for the papers, or fragments of them, should they have torn them up.

But the search was useless; the papers could not be found.

Colonel Burbank and Royal returned from the Gypsy camp to report that Banta had left before dawn on a hunt, and a number of his people also came.

Then the party from the village arrived, and along with the constable and coroner came a large party.

The story of the Gypsy was heard, the situation of affairs conned, the camp of the hunters found, and in the pockets of each was a large sum of money.

This, with their positions and the money found on them, showed that they had shot each other, after having had a quarrel from some cause unknown to all save themselves.

Banta told a straight story, the master of Crag Eden corroborated what he could of it, and the coroner took charge of the effects of the two dead hunters and ordered their bodies buried near the other graves, thus adding two more tragedies to the locality of the Haunted Cliff.

But two men there could have told of an unmarked grave not far away, the cruellest tragedy of all, and those two were Raynor Rickerly and his son.

But they spoke not, the father from fear, the son for a reason known to himself.

And back from the scene went Raynor Rickerly to Crag Eden, to once more hide himself in his home, and dwell in dread that Roma Leigh was secretly plotting his ruin and death, and well did his own conscience tell him that he had cause to fear the Gypsy Queen, whose last words to him had been:

"The end is not yet."

CHAPTER LV.

DESERTED.

SEVERAL months passed away, after the tragic death of the two hunters, under the shadows of the Haunted Cliff, and yet the Romana Gypsies lingered in their camp near Crag Eden.

A number of the men of the party had gone back and forth through the country, buying and selling horses, and adding to their fortunes, for Gypsies never lose money in a trade, but the band still remained at its encampment, and no order came from its Queen to march on their wandering way.

The summer had passed and fall was at hand, and many said that the Gypsies, like the swallows, would fly southward when the chilly winds began to blow; but so far they showed no sign of doing so.

The master of Crag Eden, since the day he went to view the bodies of the dead hunters, had never left his house and grounds.

The same old feeling seemed to have come over him to hide from all the world.

Darius, Black Pink and his overseer alone saw him.

He kept up his way of sitting up all night, going to bed with the breaking of the day and sleeping until afternoon.

Then he would stroll among his gardens until

sunset, and retreat to his library to read through the darkness of the night.

It was seldom that he ever saw his son, and to all else he refused to be seen.

Over the home of Viewlands shadows had fallen, for between the young wife and her husband there seemed to be a bitter feeling existing.

Violet had become cold in manner, but was ever polite and attentive to the wishes of her husband.

He was courtly, yet distant, and went and came as he pleased.

He would be gone for the whole day, without any excuse to offer to Violet, and often remained away until midnight.

Violet knew that he was not at Riverdale, at Crag Eden, nor in the village.

Where was he then? Not a word had Violet breathed at home of the estrangement between herself and Royal.

She suffered in silence. But her face showed the traces of her sorrow, and her father spoke to her upon the subject.

She would confess nothing, tell nothing, and Colonel Burbank went to Royal Rickerly.

"Violet is a little fool, for she has gotten it into her silly head to be insanely jealous," said the husband.

"But about whom?"

"Ask her, Colonel Burbank."

The colonel did ask, but was given no satisfaction, and so decided to let matters take their course, hoping that all would come well in the end.

One afternoon Violet mounted her horse and rode away alone, for she had declined to have her attendant accompany her, as was her custom.

She had a set expression upon her face, like one who had made a firm resolve.

Hanging to the horn of her saddle was a field-glass in a leather case, and in a saddle pocket she carried a Colt's revolver, then a new weapon, which her husband had brought home with him.

She crossed the river at the ford below Crag Eden, the water rising to her saddle-girths, and then took the road around the mountain.

She went at a gallop, but the set expression never left her face.

A ride of some miles brought her to the valley, which she crossed, and then ascended the hill upon the other side.

She rode along the ridge for some distance, and halted her horse in a pine thicket.

Then she fastened him securely, and with her glass in hand made her way along on foot toward a jutting spur.

She came out within half a mile of the Haunted Cliff, and she was just upon a level with it across the glen.

Then, hiding among some bushes, she sat down with an air of perfect patience.

An hour she waited, and then took from her pocket a note.

"It says simply: 'The Cliff at five o'clock.'"

"It is now that hour."

And she looked at her watch.

"How strange that Black Ben should have picked up this note in the yard and brought it to me, saying that his master dropped it."

"Am I doing right to do as I am?"

"Yes; I must know the truth— Ah! there she comes."

As she spoke a woman appeared walking down the glen and directing her steps toward the path that led up to the cliff.

"It is the Gypsy Queen, as I thought," said Violet, through her shut teeth.

She watched her, saw her disappear in the path and soon after appear on the cliff and take a seat in the arbor.

"There he comes."

Her eyes were now upon a horseman coming down the glen, and the face of Violet Rickerly was white and stern as she recognized her husband.

She watched him until he hitched his horse at the usual place and walked away up the ridge path.

Soon after he appeared upon the cliff.

The eyes of the wife were now peering through the field-glass, and it was leveled at the cliff.

A cry escaped her as she saw her husband step into the arbor and Roma Leigh spring to her feet and throw herself into his arms.

Instantly the glass was lowered and the wife crept away through the bushes.

She regained her horse, mounted and rode away.

Reaching the valley, she urged her horse into a run and thus pressed him to the river.

She crossed, and then sped on to Viewlands.

It was dark when she arrived.

Throwing herself from her panting horse, she called to her maid:

"Nance, pack up at once all that belonged to me when I came here."

"Not a thing that your master gave me must you put into the trunks."

"Then order the wagon and come with my baggage to Riverdale to-night; but lose no time."

The surprised negress hastened to obey, and going to her husband's desk Violet wrote:

"ROYAL:—

"From this day we are as strangers to each other.

"I have endured all until I could stand no more.

"I know all.

"Never cross my path again unless it is to free me from the hated tie that binds me to you.

"Once you were my idol, but somehow I found out that you were not the man who had won my girl's heart, so changed had you become.

"To-day I hate you.

"Forever farewell.

VIOLET."

This letter was addressed, sealed, and left upon the desk of Royal Rickerly.

Then Violet ordered her carriage and was driven to the home of her parents.

What she told them seemed to bind her more closely to them, for they at once said that she was again their child as before she had left them for another's love.

It was midnight when Royal Rickerly returned to his home.

Supper awaited him, and he asked the servant if his wife had retired.

"She is not here, sah."

"Not here? Where is she?"

"Gone home, I guess, sah; but she leaved a note for you, massa."

The negro hastened to get the note, and when he saw its contents Royal Rickerly turned very pale.

He ate no supper, and until morning paced the floor of his room.

Then he mounted his horse and rode over to Riverdale.

Colonel Burbank met him at the door and firmly said:

"Mr. Rickerly, this is my house, and my daughter has sought my protection, and shall have it.

"Any communication you wish to have, must be to a view to your separation from her, and through your lawyer.

"Good-morning, sir."

"But let me explain, Colonel Burbank."

"There is no explanation you can make," and the door was closed in the face of the young planter.

Springing upon his horse, Royal Rickerly dashed at full speed to Crag Eden, and his father was awakened by his sudden entrance into his bedroom, for Darius was powerless to stay him.

"Father, my wife has deserted me," he said excitedly.

"From what I have seen and heard of late she has had good reason," was the angry reply.

"You refer to my attention to the Gypsy Queen?"

"Who else?"

"Well, Violet can go; but I wish you to transfer to me Viewlands, for you placed it and the slaves, with all belongings, in her name."

"True."

"You must change it to my name."

"It cannot be done."

"Cannot?"

"No, for the terms of the will are peculiar, and the property given to her must remain hers."

"Curses! will I be robbed of my fortune?"

"It looks so, if you call it robbery."

"And what do I get?"

"My fortune when I am dead," was the cool response.

"Then she can turn me out of Viewlands?"

"Yes."

"And I must come here to wait to step into your shoes?"

"So it seems."

With a muttered curse the young man turned away and left the room; but he heard his father's parting words:

"If luck goes hard with you, turn Gypsy."

CHAPTER LVI.

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR.

As time passed Raynor Rickerly was becoming a very thoroughly embittered man.

He was peevish even to Darius and Black Pink, and said many bitter things to them.

For several days after the visit in the early morning from his son he was more than ever disagreeable, and his servants flew around as though afraid of their lives.

Darius had told him, from gossip carried by the servants from place to place, that it was all over the neighborhood that Violet had deserted her husband, it was said from his cruel treatment of her, and that he had gone up to the city to consult a lawyer upon the matter.

Then it came out that Royal Rickerly had not been the devoted husband he was expected to be and the hero fell in the estimation of all, while his poor wife received universal sympathy.

Several days passed and Royal had not returned from the city. What he meant to do no one knew, and with the rumors out against him many hoped that he would never return.

"My God! is his conduct another curse upon me?" groaned Raynor Rickerly, as he paced his library one night a few days after the departure of his son for the city.

The evening was balmy, the windows were open, and the master of Crag Eden did not see a form standing on the piazza without and gazing into the window at him.

Soon the form shrunk back out of sight, and shortly after the library door opened softly and a woman entered the room.

Raynor Rickerly tried to cry out, but he could not, and he sunk down into his easy-chair.

"I have come to see you, Raynor Rickerly, and I came unannounced. Not one of your servants knows of my coming, and it is better so."

The speaker was Roma Leigh!

"Why are you here?" gasped the man, at last finding his breath.

"To settle old scores between us."

"In Satan's name, who are you?"

"Roma Leigh, the Gypsy Queen."

"You are not the Roma Leigh of my past."

The woman smiled and said:

"Listen, and I'll tell you all, for I am going to leave Virginia soon, but I wish to settle the debt between us first."

"There is no debt between us."

"You are mistaken, for there is a very heavy one, as I shall prove. Be patient and listen to my story."

"Years ago, Roma Leigh, the Gypsy Queen, lost her heart to you, and won your love, as she believed, in return."

"You passed days, weeks, months together, and you were so infatuated that secretly you took the Gypsies' oath of allegiance."

"You studied the language with Roma, knew the customs, secret rites, and all the mysteries of her people, and all believed that you would marry her."

"But no; another woman crossed your path; the Gypsy girl was cast aside and you married that other."

"Roma Leigh warned you, but you heeded not. Your wife gave birth to twins in time, little boys, and you idolized them. Your beautiful wife was the first to go. She was Roma Leigh's first victim."

"One of your boys, Rafael, was stolen, and you knew that to be Roma Leigh's second blow."

"She wrote you he was dead, and you buried a body which you deemed to be that of your child; but it was not your child, for he did not die."

"Did not die?" gasped the man.

"No; he was sent into Mexico and sold there, to become nothing more than a street-thief, or road-robber, as the case might be."

"If he has not been hanged he is in Mexico now, a wicked man of course."

"My God, have mercy!"

"Don't pray, for he can be no worse than you are."

"Roma Leigh was avenged in part, for she kept you hiding like a wolf in your den; but you were driven to desperation and decided to strike back."

"You plotted and planned well; you dogged the Gypsies' trail to find them in a foreign land, and then you did strike back hard and cruelly."

"You struck at the life of Roma Leigh by torture, and she died by your hand."

"Thank God! and you, who are you?"

"She was not dead when you left her. A Gypsy boy had seen her enter the cottage, and men went thither in alarm to look for her."

"She rallied, and, with her dying breath told me, child though I was, who her murderer was, and made me vow to avenge her."

"Who are you, for you are her living image?"

"I am Roma Leigh, the daughter of the woman you murdered, and of the man whose life you also took, for Incah, the Gypsy captain, was my father."

"I did not kill him!" almost shouted the man.

"Oh, yes, you did, for I have traced it all out. You did not miss some papers you locked away, yet should have destroyed. I got them by night from your strong-box, to which I got a key made. I saw there the dying letter of the man who died for your act, Dick Surry."

"His letter told all, and I knew that you had freed Incah, my father, to gain favor with the Gypsies, and killed him afterward for these secrets he held against you."

"You took papers from his braided hair; but I had the originals, for he gave them to me the day he was arrested, and you got but the copies."

"You see, Raynor Rickerly, I have tracked you through all, and I know how black your life has been."

"I took also the papers from the dead hunter, which you gave him, for the thought came to me that you knew of that midnight execution, and had bribed others to swear out a charge against us."

"Now, Roma Leigh, the present Queen of the Romana Gypsies, wishes her revenge."

"Bad as you are, murderer of my brother and father as you are, I love your son!"

"Your son's wife has deserted him, but by the will left, she owns Viewlands and all belonging to it."

"You are a very wealthy man, and your son has nothing, while you could cut him off and make a beggar of him."

"I wish you to make your will, leaving every dollar you possess to your son, Royal Rickerly."

"It will be his when I die."

"If you do not please to cut him off, which

the will you inherited by gives you the right to do."

"I have this house until my death against all claims."

"So be it; but your death is not far off. Make the will, I say, as I direct."

"It is made."

"Signed and witnessed?"

"Yes."

"Let me see it."

"It is in that box, so if you have a key get it."

Roma Leigh took from her pocket a bunch of keys, opened the box and soon had the will.

"It is as you said."

"Now it but remains for you to die."

"If you are not dead within ten days, then I shall charge you with the murder of my parents and other crimes that will hang you."

"For the sake of your honor I advise you to die before the ten days, rather than hang."

"Here is a powder that stills the heart without pain. Try it, Raynor Rickerly."

She laid a paper upon the table before him and glided from the room, going out as softly as she had entered.

She slipped out of the front door, across the piazza, and down the broad steps, not noticing the form of a man who was but half-concealed by the window-blind and had heard all that had passed between the two in the library.

He passed his hand across his forehead as though trying to awaken from a dream, and then glided away from where he stood and disappeared among the foliage of the flower-garden.

CHAPTER LVII.

A LETTER.

ROYAL RICKERLY returned to Viewlands after some days passed in the city.

His lawyers had cheered him with the belief that Violet's title to the estate, in spite of the will, would not hold good, and also stated that it would be best to test this before she began proceedings for a divorce from him.

Upon his arrival he found several letters for him. One, a large one, was sealed, and his butler said that it had been brought by hand.

He broke the seal in an indifferent manner, as he sat in his easy-chair in the library, but a fierce oath broke from his lips as he read the first line.

Then, with a face white with some great dread, he read what was written there.

It was as follows:

"October 10th, 1848.

"I can see your face pale, Rafael Rickerly, as you read these lines, for they tell you that the brother whom you sought to kill is not dead as you have long hoped."

"When I met you in Mexico, became your prisoner, how glad was I to find the brother whom I believed dead."

"I forgave your life as a guerrilla, as a lagoon pirate, when I heard your story of how Roma Leigh, the Gypsy Queen, to be avenged upon our father, had made you all that was bad."

"I could not censure you under the circumstances, and I was glad, so glad, to redeem you from the past you had led and bring you back to honor and home."

"You heard me tell all about home, of the woman I loved and her riches, and then the devil in your nature set to work to possess all—to destroy me."

"Your own men, by your orders, came and took us from your quarters, you pretending to be arrested for having me with you."

"You were set free soon after, I was sent to prison to be starved to death."

"You, knowing how much we were alike, and that the years that had passed would also aid your deception, assuming to be Royal Rickerly, led our naval forces into a trap, and then, saying you had escaped from a Mexican dungeon, started to our home in Virginia."

"Before you left, word was brought to you by one of your men that I was dead."

"It was a mistake, though I was supposed to be dead, and thus escaped from prison."

"You came on here and played your cards well, stole from me my wife, and pretended so well that no one doubted you."

"But the Satan in you was only resting, and it broke out again, until your cruelty drove your wife from your home, and you became madly in love with Roma Leigh, the Gypsy Queen."

"I have tracked you, Rafael Rickerly, and know you as you are."

"Long I was ill in Mexico, then was rearrested, and only escaped two months ago from a living death."

"I saw a paper in which was my name at the hotel in New Orleans. I had believed you to have been executed; but this told me the whole story of your villainy."

"In disguise I came here, and I know our father, too, to his shame I say it, as you also know him, for I was going to secretly visit him. saw Roma Leigh pass in before me and heard all that passed between them."

"What he will do I know not, but Heaven grant he take the Gypsy Queen's advice and not wait to die upon the gallows."

"As I now write you, I write our father the whole story, and also to Colonel Burbank I make known how you have deceived him and his daughter."

"The Gypsy Queen gave our father ten days in which to decide whether he would calmly die by his own hand or go to the gallows for his crimes."

"I give you one day after the reception of this letter in which to leave the country or put a bullet through your black heart."

"If you do not do one or the other, I shall have"

you arrested and let you stand trial for your crimes, for not one atom of mercy have I for you in my soul.

"Had it been me alone you had wronged, then I would have said nothing; but you have wronged so cruelly the woman I loved more than life, and I will be as merciless as an Indian if you ever cross my path again.

"Go! or suffer the consequences.
"Remember you have but a day and night between you and justice if you refuse to go."

"ROYAL RICKERLY."

With the last words of this strange letter Rafael Rickerly, as he is now known to be, sprung to his feet. His face was livid, and he looked years older in a few minutes of time.

Quickly he moved about, made up hastily a package, and ordering his horse rode rapidly away from Viewlands.

The next morning a startling rumor ran through the neighborhood to the effect that the master of Crag Eden had been found dead in his easy-chair in his library.

It was true and in his clinched hand was found a crumpled note, which the doctor drew forth and read.

It was as follows:

"GYPSY CAMP.
"Midnight.

FATHER:—

"I write but a line to say that I have deceived you all, for I am your son *Rafael*, not *Royal* Rickerly.

"I met Royal in Mexico, and, believing him dead, impersonated him.

"He lives and can tell you all.

"Your will is made out in Royal's favor, so let it be, for I will not need it, as I leave to-night, having become a Gypsy, for I madly love their Queen, and their wandering life will be my own hereafter.

"Look upon me as dead!

"Take Roma Leigh's advice, for she will do as she said independent of me. Farewell.

"Yours

"RAFAEL, THE GYPSY."

Looking from the window, Doctor Lovering, whom Darius had summoned, saw that the Gypsies had indeed gone; their place of encampment was deserted.

Colonel Burbank came, and into his hands the doctor placed the note.

But he already knew all.

"Was it suicide, doctor?" asked Colonel Burbank.

"No, heart disease, brought on by the shock," was the reply; but, had the worthy man of medicine investigated, he would have found that the cause of death was the deadly poison given to the master of Crag Eden by Roma Leigh, with the advice:

"Try it!"

He had tried it when he had read his son's letter; but, before doing so, he had destroyed every vestige of paper that would criminate him, after death.

And so through the neighborhood flew the rumors of the death of the master of Crag Eden, the going of the Gypsies with Rafael Rickerly, one of their number, and the return of Royal Rickerly, the gallant, young sailor hero.

CHAPTER LVIII.

CONCLUSION.

With horror and pity at the misfortunes and sorrows he had known, Raynor Rickerly was laid away to rest in the family burying-ground, and at the funeral every eye was turned upon a darkly-bronzed, stern-faced man who stood with uncovered hat at the grave.

It was Royal Rickerly—silent, sad-faced and looking the hero he had proven himself to be.

Colonel Burbank was there, but not Violet or her mother.

Together the colonel and Royal left the grave, and the new master of Crag Eden returned to his home.

Some weeks after Riverdale was sold, and Colonel Burbank and his family sought a home in a far Southern State.

For awhile the master of Crag Eden dwelt alone in his home; then came news one day that caused him to spring from his chair with a startling exclamation.

He held a paper in his hand and he had read:

"A FATAL DISASTER TO GYPSIES.

"As a large band of Romana Gypsies were crossing the Mississippi River in flat-boats on Friday last, the steamboat *Nemesis* passed, and the waves from her swamped one of the boats and a dozen lives were lost.

"Among the drowned were Roma Leigh, the Queen, and Rafael, the Gypsy captain, with several of the prominent men of the band.

"Some of the bodies were recovered and those of the Queen and the Gypsy captain were buried in one grave on the river bank, for it was said that they were lovers in life and that the young man had left a happy home and wealth to follow the destinies of the dark-faced but beautiful Roma Leigh.

"The Gypsies seem broken hearted over the sad affair, and say that they will never again come to America, but remain in foreign lands."

Two weeks after this notice was read by Royal Rickerly, he was standing by a newly-made grave on the banks of the Mississippi River.

Men were opening the grave under his orders and when the bodies were seen he gave one glance and turned away.

"It is he,—at last his wretched life is ended."

Crag Eden was offered for sale, but found no buyer, and it was left to go to ruin; but Viewlands was sold for a good price, and the master of Crag Eden wended his way southward and bought an elegant home in a far Southern State.

It adjoined Refuge, the plantation of Colonel Burbank, and one year after the death of Rafael Rickerly, his beautiful widow became the wife of the man who had been her boy lover.

THE END.

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